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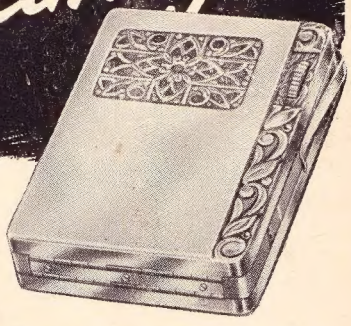

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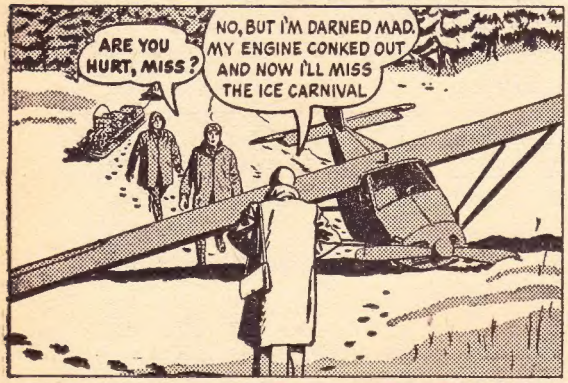

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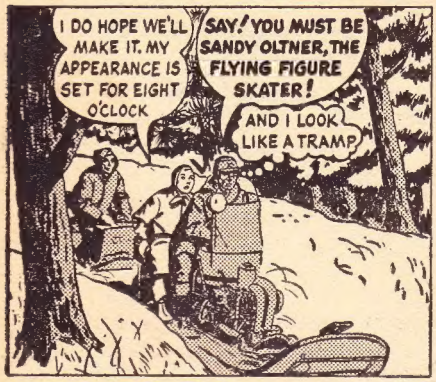
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Tempestuous Frontier Love Novel

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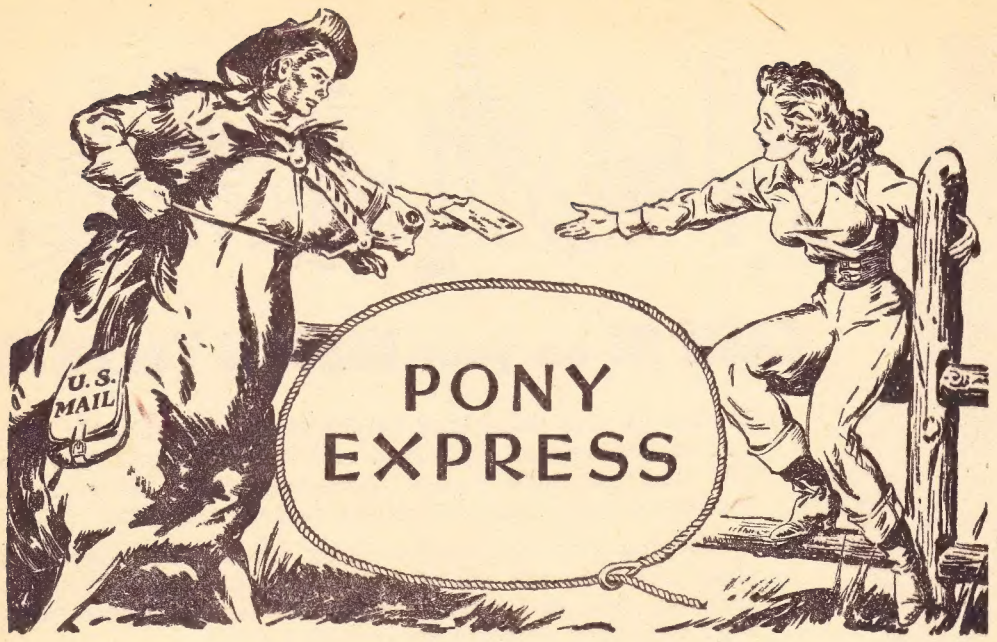

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Buenas dias, pards,

Here's another column of friendly letters from corresponding pards all over the world. They're all mightly eager to get a pen-hold on you readers, and have you become their mail-buddies. And it sure is an interesting and plumb pleasing way to not only make new pals, but to learn all about this fascinating earth we live on.

Each issue we select as many of your letters as possible to print in this column. Although it's impossible to use every letter you send us, just be patient and bear with us while we try to get around to printing yours. And meanwhile, you can start making new pards by reading the letters we've pulled out of the mailbags for printing this month.

Redhead of the Hoosgow

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl of 18 years with long, auburn or dark red hair, eyes almost the color of my hair, *no freckles.* I weigh 120 lbs. and stand 5 ft. 6 or 7 in. tall.

Oh, yes! I'm the jailor's daughter and I live in the Caldwell Parish Courthouse. My friends call me "jailbird." I'm an electric steel guitar and Spanish guitar player—have four guitars. I'm getting a microphone, so I guess I'll be entertaining the jailbirds. I study at Mills Conservatory of Music in Monroe, La., and am planning to teach music

I play on amateurs—won top prize last year. One summer I played on the radio. I like mostly Hawaiian music. Now I work here at the clinic as assistant nurse.

Musicians, and anyone interested in tales of the jail—write. I'll send snaps of myself.

MARIE ALLEN
Box 366
Columbia, La.

All-Around Good Skate

Dear Editor:

I am a South African of Scottish descent, and live in the centre city of S. Africa. To give a brief description of myself: I was 21 years old in July; have light-brown hair, blue eyes and am 5 ft. 6½ in. in height.

My hobbies; my favorite being art, then dancing, camping, photography and many more. For outdoor life; baseball, swimming, football, ice and roller skating, cricket and still more. I also belong to the local Scottish pipe band as a drummer.

Don't hesitate, and drop me a line soon.

MALCOLM D. B. SMITH
4a Saltzmann St.
Bloemfontein, O. F. S.
South Africa

Versatile Glamor Girls

Dear Editor:

How about a couple of vaudeville actresses getting acquainted with your large circle of pen

pals? We don't stay in one place very long but, pals, we'll notify you every time we change addresses. We are two sisters and we are in a vaudeville act. We dance, sing, yodel, play guitars and sometimes we both even play at being comedians.

My sister Ann—stage name, "Jerry"—is 21 years old, with long wavy black hair, and big black eyes. She is very pretty. Rita—stage name, "Toney"—is aged 19, with big blue eyes and long wavy blonde hair.

We have no time to date men, but we will write to them and exchange photographs. By the way, we played a small part in "Angel With Wings." We love all sports, but have no time for them either. We are just a couple of career girls. Someday we'll settle down when the right men come our way.

Girls, how about you dropping us a line too? We love to receive letters and they cheer us up. For the first 50 letters we receive, we'll send you a glamour picture of us, separate or together. We are now at home with our parents, so hurry up, guys and gals, and drop us a few lines. We promise to answer each and every letter received.

RITA GAIL NAYLOR
and
ANN NAYLOR
c/o General Delivery
Lebannon, Ore.

If You Knew Susie

Dear Editor:

I am 14 years old, 5 ft. 1½ in. tall, have long black wavy hair, and brown eyes. I'm of Spanish descent and my nickname is Susie. I love to swim, read, and dance—but especially have fun.

How about it boys and girls, 14 to 40, let's write.

JUANITA DEL CAMPO
Dalton Manor Station
Benicia, Calif.

Lanky Hillbilly

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of eleven years of age, with brown hair and blue eyes. I stand 5 ft. 11 in. tall, and have a very dark suntan. My weight is a light 104 lbs.

My hobbies are collecting old-time car pictures, and movie stars also. I love horses too, but I'm not a very good rider. But I try and am learning fast. So if you want to know what a real, long, lanky hillbilly looks like, just write me and I'll answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

This is the first time I have ever tried to corral the Pony Express, and I hope I'll hear from some of you guys and gals. I know that you teenagers don't care too much to write to a young boy, so anyone who does care to write to me—please don't be bashful about it. I live on a ranch 58 miles from Prescott, and I sure get lonesome living way out here in the sticks without much company.

BILL (Rusty) PEHL
Camp Wood Rt.
Arizona

Tophand Eyeful

Dear Editor:

I am a nature lover—of the opposite sex, exclusively. "The not quite so bright half." Yours truly is a well proportioned, 5 ft. 11 in. tall, black-haired (worn in bangs), green-eyed, mature she-male of 17 years. Modesty is not listed among my virtues, if any.

I had aspirations once of becoming a quiz kid, but the spark never quite caught fire. I play piano, sing exceptionally well, type expertly, play the French horn, am widely read, love all types of music—but abhor strictly-from-corn hillbilly music. '48 saw me a high-school graduate at 16.

For me life is too short, as I am desirous of becoming a model, a professional basketball player, newspaper reporter.

Remember the mailbox. It's languishing for female and male mail, but particularly for first-class male mail. Anything alive and kicking, please answer my eloquent plea!

PHYLLIS JEANNE BLACK
Hamilton, Mo.

Ruth's a Good Coosie

Dear Editor:

May I ride down the road with you apiece? Kind of lonesome, that I am, and I like to talk to people. I make a good listener too.

Of course, I've been around a lot, and I don't look bad with my black curly hair, hazel eyes, and 5 ft. 4½ in., so I'm sure someone will find me a good pal to ride the trails with. Being a plumb good cook, and letter writer, not to mention a dozen other things, I can promise there won't be a dull moment for those of you who write.

RUTH KOVAL
912 Parsley Ave.
Pascagoula, Miss.

Call Her Bobby or Honey

Dear Editor:

I'm a junior and nearly seventeen,
The '48 and '49 high-school queen.

I have brown hair and gray eyes too,
My pet colors are gold and blue.

I'm five-feet-two and full of fun.
I tip the scales at a hundred and one.

I would rather write to boys—any will do,
Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two.

Tall or short or handsome or not.
When you write, please send a snapshot.

I love writing poetry and hearing Como sing,
But when I get a letter, my heart goes zing-zing.

I am a very good girl and say my prayers at night,

So, come on everybody, won't you please sit down and write?

BARBARA CONNOLLY
c/o General Delivery
Watson, Mo.

(Please continue on page 96)

SHAMELESS HEARTS ON RENEGADE TRAIL

Dazzling Amy fought her private war with the brazen traitor—knowing she couldn't win . . . unless she lost!

By Marian O'Hearn

Tempestuous Frontier Love Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Keep Away, Stranger!

AMY put her gold-framed handbag down on the desk and placed a small, oddly-shaped leather case on top of it. She smiled the bright but unseeing smile reserved for the faceless beings found behind hotel desks and said:

"A front room, please. One that has plenty of air. The porter insisted on carrying my luggage off to some mysterious place instead of bringing it here. Have him put it in my room at once."

There was no reply and she looked, with sharpening eyes, at the hotel clerk. Her lips broke apart, as her heart lifted into a great, slow stroke which shook her body.

For a fleeting moment, no longer than the time needed for her lashes to spread away from her eyes, she had the sensation of seeing a man dressed in broadcloth and costly linen. The kind of man who, in another world, might carry a sword.

"Yes, ma'am." His low words were vibrant as a dark cello. "Will you repeat what you said—slowly?"

Amy smiled again, but the smile ended in a small, explosive chuckle. The heat must have distorted her vision, for neither broadcloth nor sword had ever played a

"If I *don't* kiss you—I'll be wise," he said.

part in his life. He was wearing the usual costume of the territorial frontier. Woolen shirt, rough dark trousers, boots and a heavy, holstered gun. Yet . . . the sense of plunging from a great height returned and her heart became a gigantic hammer pounding slowly, fantastically.

Although he was not unusually tall, the high-headed, straight-lined poise of his body was intangibly, but definitely, commanding. The same quality was stamped on his face. It was in his eyes and the shape of his features, even in the tones of his voice.

"I'm sorry you didn't understand me," Amy said. "I asked for a front room. An airy one." She stared at his eyes. They were gray, the irises black-ringed, and their depths holding glistening restlessness. His hair was brown, cut very short and curled stubbornly into almost childish ringlets.

"There are only eight rooms in the whole hotel, ma'am, I'm not sure there are any vacancies. I'll look at the occupied list." He took out a heavily penciled card and studied it. The light, outlining his head, showed that the tips of his lashes curved upward. "I'm afraid all the front rooms are taken. Besides, what about the rest of your party?"

"I'm alone."

He dropped the card and his glance struck down at her. His eyes were no longer a gray which glistened with vitality—but the color of a knife blade. "Alone? Do you mean you came here alone? How'd you get here? By stage from Atchison?"

"Yes, I am alone. No, I'm not from Atchison. I live in New York, and I got here the usual way—via the Overland Cross-Continental stage. Do you cross-examine all would-be-guests?"

His glance moved over her and the odd glisten showed in his eyes. "Why should I?" he asked. "They don't interest me. Now, if you'll sign the register, I'll change things around so you can have a corner room. How would twenty-four do? It's a parlor-bedroom in front, has windows on two sides and is the coolest place in the house."

"Fine." She wrote her name, "Amy Demartine," in big, sweeping letters. "What about my luggage? I want it."

"Certainly. I'll take it up myself." He examined her signature and regarded her with a new thoughtfulness. "The name Amy means gentle and beloved. Girls with that name should be shy and even a little pale. At least, fair and fragile looking."

The cello-dark voice vibrated disturbingly along her nerves, against an unwilling part of her mind. Yet she could not turn away. She was too angrily aware of the deliberate challenge in his words. "Then I'm not fair and fragile?" she demanded.

"That depends. If you intend fair to mean beautiful, it fits perfectly—but I meant blonde. Besides, there's nothing shy or fragile about you."

"Thanks. Is this personality analysis part of the hotel service?"

"No. It's special, something reserved for the few."

"And the few are?"

He grinned. "People like us. We're alike—you and I. Made for the same world and accustomed to the same weapons."

She shaped her lips into a slow smile. "I wish I could understand you. Since I can't, please take care of my bags." But her glance remained on his and her eyes held another kind of smile. One which glinted with laughter as knowing and assured as his.

"I'll be right up with the luggage. Here's the key—" He broke off as a small, white-haired old man entered the lobby and moved hurriedly toward the desk.

"The porter tells me there's a traveler here looking for accommodations— Oh, beg your pardon, ma'am. I didn't see you at first. I'm sure sorry we can't put you up. Just chock full."

Amy's black lashes pushed together. "I've already been given a room," she said. "And I intend to keep it."

THE old man's eyebrows moved and jiggled above his glasses. "Ma'am, I apologize humbly and deeply, but you can't keep the room." He turned angrily on the man behind the desk. "You knew we were full up, Mr. Brockett. When

you offered to look after things for a few minutes so I could go out, I didn't think you'd cook up a mess like this."

"It's all right," Brockett said soothingly. "I gave her twenty-four. It's not occupied."

"But it is—it will be! It's reserved—a very special reservation. You knew that, too!"

"Sure. Just throw out whoever's in the room behind twenty-four and switch the reservation to that. The young lady has to have a room and the La Salle's the only decent hotel in Osawkee."

"If it was any other time or the reservation for anyone else—"

"Miss Demartine," Brockett said, coming from behind the desk as though not hearing the other man's excited words. "This is George La Salle, owner and manager. He's really very glad to have you here, but he's a bit upset right now."

La Salle straightened, drew a heavy breath and arranged his face into a welcoming smile. "I most certainly am happy you've arrived, ma'am. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," Amy murmured almost demurely.

"Well, now." His expression became beaming. "You're a very lovely young lady. . . . Can't understand how anybody'd take a chance on letting you travel alone."

"If you just show me to my room, please?" And there was a faint, edge of coolness in her voice.

"I'll do that," Brocket cut in. "Follow me, ma'am." He went to the stairs and up to the landing, where he turned to look down at her. He was smiling and, in the poise of head and shoulders, was the odd element of authority. His short, ringleted hair did not blend with the rest of his face. Or, perhaps it completed a picture. The full, strong mouth and the frankly challengingly vitality of his gray eyes needed only the cap of brown curls.

"Just another few steps, Your Highness."

Her narrow, delicate brows lifted but Amy did not speak until he unlocked the door of room twenty-four. He grinned and bowed, as she passed him to enter the room. "You seem to be having a lot of fun. Being called *your highness* can be easily interpreted as impertinence."

"I didn't mean it that way, ma'am." He closed the door, crossed the room and opened the windows. Turning back to her, he said: "I called you *your highness* because you look like a queen. I thought of a queen—a legendary one—as soon as I saw you."

Her eyes smiled, reflecting the glint of knowing amusement in his, but her mouth was still, suddenly almost sultry. "I didn't remind you of a *princess?*"

"No. Young as you are—a queen. I visualized someone out of a legend. A girl born not only to a throne, but to the distilled knowledge of the centuries."

Amy straightened and her body went taut. She felt herself plunging from a tremendous heighth, dropping endlessly through space. Instantly her will fought the sensation of shock and forced her brain to reason with her senses. He couldn't be a territorial settler or even a smooth frontier adventurer.

At the first sight of him she had thought of clothes made by elegant tailors and the background of a sophisticated world. George La Salle, the hotel owner, had mentioned Brockett's "looking after things" while he was out, so it was obvious that Brockett did not work in the hotel. Probably, he did not even live here.

Her senses cleared and steadied, but her heart was moving in huge, fantastic strokes which shook her body.

"My luggage still hasn't appeared. Will you please find out about it, Mr. Brockett?"

"I'd like it better if you'd call me Sax."

"Sax . . ." Her lips parted to shape the word but she closed them again before her voice could sound.

He grinned. "Even if you won't let yourself ask, I'll explain. It's short for Sacoxie—which is an Indian name. It was given me by—but I'll tell you about it, next time. You want your baggage. Good evening, ma'am."

"I've decided there won't be a next time." But again, her lips pressed tightly together and held back her words.

He walked to the door, hesitated and turned back. "You're probably puzzled and annoyed to wait so long for your bags. It's not the fault of the hotel, ma'am. It's a government order. Every stage station,

inn or hotel is required to search the luggage of each guest."

"Search their—my luggage! Why?"

"Government orders, as I just told you. The idea is to prevent fire-arms or ammunition being smuggled into this part of the territory."

"That's ridiculous. I don't believe you. If my trunks or bags have been tampered with I—I'll take action."

"Do that, ma'am," he said and grinned. "I'll act as your witness." He opened the door and went out. Amy's delicately lined brows pushed together, driving lines into the smooth flesh between them. He had reminded her of someone she could not quite remember. Or of something which had been harshly unpleasant. His high-headed carriage, his eyes, the broad forehead, the dissatisfied mouth. . . .

She would not see him again. Even if she couldn't entirely avoid him, she could keep him at such a distance as to be totally unaware of him.

CHAPTER TWO

Legendary Queen

AMY'S dress trunk and bags were delivered at six. She unpacked the trunk, hung the dresses in the closest and asked the chamber maid to prepare a bath. Then, Amy went to the dresser and sat on the backless chair before the mirror. Brushing out her hair, she pinned it up out of the way and began to make up her face. First, a very thin film of oil-base to keep her skin moist, then enough rouge to give her cheeks a faint glow of color and a careful powdering. Bending close to the glass, she outlined her lips with grenadine-red lip paste.

As she finished the absorbing task, a flicker of light in the mirror caught her glance and she saw the chambermaid staring with something like horror in her pale eyes.

I thought you'd gone," Amy said, turning from the dresser. "I can do the rest myself, thank you."

"You—paint," the woman said, her voice shaking. "You put paint on your face!"

Amy's lips parted in angry surprise, but she said: "Yes. Lots of women do nowadays, especially in Paris and New York. You can go. I'll send for you when I need you."

The maid's weathered face flushed darkly. "Maybe you'll send—but I won't come. I'm as good as you are. Better, since I don't paint my face like a hussy." Turning her back pointedly, she stalked to the door and went out.

The girl grinned and swung around to the mirror. *Hussy.* Wasn't that what Sax Brockett had said, in slightly different words? And both of them were probably right. Her grin disappeared and she studied her reflection carefully, almost pensively. Her skin was so white that it looked faintly luminous.

Her dark hair which grew in deep, rich waves, was often black as onyx, and her heavy-lidded eyes were the color of bittersweet or black violets. The grenadine rouge had lightened the wine tone of her mouth but it had also obliterated some of the youngness of lips which at times seemed angrily troubled.

She brushed out her hair again and arranged it into softly smooth lines which made a frame of dark light for her face.

She dropped her voluminous-skirted, violet-blue frock over her head, straightened the tight bodice, fastened the long rows of hooks, powered her face again and touched her hair with perfume.

She was ready for dinner. As she went downstairs, old George La Salle hurried out from behind the desk. "You're really dazzling, ma'am."

"Is dinner being served now? Where's the dining room?"

His eyebrows lifted and trembled above his glasses. "It's supper out here, ma'am. The big meal's served in the middle of the day. But just come with me. I'll take you to the dining room."

He darted through an open door and announced in a shouting whisper: "Make room there, gents. Button your shirts and try not to eat like hogs."

She followed him into a room where a dozen men were seated at a single, long, narrow table. They stood up hastily, with much scraping of chairs.

"Miss Amy Demartine," La Salle said loudly. "Meet Joe Freemont, John Carson, Will Dumont and . . ." He mumbled

hurriedly through the rest of the names.

"Good evening. Please sit down. Don't let me interupt your dinner."

They sat down but dinner was completely forgotten. Their eyes fixed on her and their glances did not waver even for a moment. They studied her face, her hair, her clothing, her jewelry. They asked stilted questions about "the trip out" and "things in the East."

Another sun-paled woman appeared, carrying a huge tray. She placed a bowl of soup in front of the girl and said: "I'm Harriet, the waitress. It's all right to eat the soup. I made it myself."

Amy regarded the thick liquid uncertainly, tasted it experimentally. It was excellent. She ate all of it and then helped herself liberally to the baked ham, corn dodgers, small loaves of corn bread, and stewed fruit.

As she finished, she glanced around at the still-staring men. "Meeting all of you has been very pleasant," she said, and her grenadine-red mouth shaped into a smile. "Good night."

They bowed her out, crowded into the lobby to arrange her chair and rushed to the desk to buy her copies of the newest magazine. She accepted the magazines, thanked them again and started for the stairs—only to turn back.

"Mr. La Salle." She smiled up at the hotel owner. "I don't see the—clerk. Is he around? There's something I want to ask him."

"I'm the only clerk here, ma'am— Oh, do you mean Sax Brockett? He was just behind the desk to help me out—"

"And—" a cello-deep voice cut smoothly across the words—"I'm still behind the desk." He got out of a chair which was half-hidden by the squat hotel safe. "This is a great hideaway," he explained. "Nobody ever looks here—it's too obvious. But, I'm waiting. You had something to ask me?"

"Yes . . ." A smile flickered across the surface of her eyes and their depths glinted with knowing acknowledgement. "Does the porter keep a list of the luggage? And does he check it carefully when it's delivered to the guest's room? I'm not sure that I have all of my luggage."

"Then you'll get it. I'll talk to the porter right away. But maybe I'd better go up to your room first and list each piece you've received."

"Yes, that will be necessary."

The corners of his mouth quirked and his gray glance took on the glisten of silk. "I'll be there in a few minutes, ma'am."

"Wait now, Sax," La Salle broke in. "No need for you to do the flunkey's work—"

But Brockett was already crossing the lobby toward the baggage room. And as Amy went upstairs, her grenadine-bright lips shaped into full, gay curves.

WHEN Sax Brockett's knock sounded, Amy glanced quickly around the room. She had replaced the oil lamps with candles, arranged glasses and a bottle of vintage burgandy on a lace-covered table. The burgandy was from the small stock of wine her father had insisted was a health precaution on any long journey. The wavering candlelight touched even the thick hotel glasses with brilliance.

More candles had been grouped near the chair in which she intended to sit, so that their soft light would glow on her hair and skin.

She moved slowly to the door, her head lifting to an angle which would stress the lines of her full, luminously white throat. "Come in," she said.

"Good evening, ma'am. I brought the porter's list of your luggage."

"Please come in."

He entered the room easily, command in the poise of his body. "Where shall I start? You've probably unpacked some of the bags."

"Just my dress trunk and one or two other pieces. I'm not sure . . ." She glanced at the pile of still-unopened bags, frowned and looked up at him expectantly. "But I know you can straighten everything out," she added softly.

His dark-ringed gray eyes took on a glistening sheen and the corners of his wide-lipped mouth stirred. "Certainly. Still, it might be better for a while if we forgot the whole business," he said with equal softness.

Warmth stung into her face and she straightened, sharply. But as his glance

caught hers, she found herself smiling in response to his grin. The smile turned into a low laugh.

"That might be better. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

When she settled into the chair near the carefully grouped candles, he took a place on the small, stiff sofa.

"What could bring a girl like you to Osawkee?"

"I should think that is obvious."

"Not to me."

Amy left her chair, went to the table and opened the bottle of wine in which the cork had already been loosened. She poured the burgandy carefully, and handed him a glass. "Haven't you heard about the public land to be sold here at auction tomorrow? One thousand acres will go to the highest bidder."

"In the name of—Buchanan!" Brockett turned so swiftly that the wine spilled over the rim of his glass. "You came out here for that? Traveled all the way across the continent? Why didn't you learn the actual facts before starting such a trip? Didn't anyone back there know the truth —that you wouldn't be permitted to bid in as much as a single acre?"

"I won't be *permitted* to bid? What are you talking about?"

"You haven't a chance of buying any of the land."

"I certainly will. Actually, though, I'll buy it in the name of my father, Addison Demartine. I'm merely acting as his agent. And, as the auction is public, authorized by the United States government—"

Brockett broke in, impatiently. "Forget about the government authorization. The words *public auction* are just a poor joke in this country and—"

A quick, thin knock sounded. George La Salle called: "Sax, it's time."

"Come in, please!" Amy snapped. "Don't shout from the hall."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry." La Salle peered through the door he had cautiously opened. Looking worriedly at Brockett, he said: "Some—people have just arrived. The people who had reserved this room. They're asking for you."

"I'll be there right away."

The old man nodded and shut the door again. Obviously, Sax Brockett was a friend of whoever had arranged to occupy the room which he had, so casually, turned over to her.

"Please," Amy said. "Explain about the land auction."

"I haven't time. I'll tell you later—first thing in the morning."

"But I must know now. Right now!"

"It'd take an hour to describe the public land setup in this district and I've got to leave you in exactly one minute. Let's enjoy the minute. Shall I fill the glasses again?"

"Yes."

He poured the wine and lifted his glass. "To your temper, long may it rage, because it turns your eyes into purple flame. The loveliest flame I've ever seen."

"The land auction is so important to me—"

"And," Brockett went on as if he had not heard her words, "at this moment your mouth is fire, too. A fire that's deeper than the burgandy you're drinking."

Her lashes moved together and she made an impatient gesture. "I think you had better lines the first time we met. They were very good, in fact. Something about a legendary queen."

"I couldn't forget because, right now, you're more than ever like that."

"Born possessing the wisdom of the ages and so on?"

"I said *'knowledge'*, not wisdom. They're two different things."

"I don't believe that. At least—I doubt it."

"Then, I'll demonstrate." He put down his glass and his gray eyes glistened with the deep sheen of recklessly surging vitality. "For instance: I know I shouldn't kiss you. That's knowledge. If I *don't* kiss you—I'll be wise."

Before Amy could move away his mouth came down on hers and his arms caught her closely, tightly against him. His kiss tasted of wine. Warm wine. As if it were part of the burgandy-colored fire he had described. Her lips were being patterned to his, shaped to his demand...

"So—" his voice aroused her, caught her back from the bottomless depths— "I just proved that I lack wisdom." She was free of his embrace and he was moving away from her, turning to say:

"Good-night, my dark queen."

As Amy heard the door open, she whirled toward him, anger bursting over her in a wild, white blaze. Her hands lifted and flung out in blind, unreasoning fury. One of them encountered the wine bottle. Her fingers closed over it, lifted and threw it at the closing door. It struck with the crashing impact of gunfire and shattered against the door.

"I don't believe him!" she said aloud. "He was lying about the land auction."

CHAPTER THREE

Surrounded!

AMY assured herself that she was once more entirely calm and self-possessed, although completely bored with her first evening in Osawkee. She ignored the broken glass and wine-stained carpet near the door.

She sat down in the nearest chair, close to the rear wall. Stillness settled around her. A lonely quiet, stirred only by a light breeze which bent the candle flames. Then a muffled voice sounded from the other side of the wall near which she sat.

There was another, sharper sound, like that of an opening door. And a second voice spoke in such deeply resonant tones she could hear each word. "Evening, Major Brockett," the voice rumbled.

Major Brockett! And he was answering in quiet, cello-low tones which made his words indistinct. The door opened and closed again. Then it opened several times at brief intervals. Finally, the deeply resonant voice said: "Major Brockett, as chairman of the Military Board of the Free State of Kansas, will you call the meeting to order?"

Someone banged on a table. The man whom Brockett had called General, roared: "Forget the red tape. The Territorial Governor has just issued a proclamation calling all members of this board traitors. And a detachment of regular troops is encamped outside this town.

"Right at this minute—only a few miles away—gangs of Border Ruffians are in the field and being attacked by General

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"BILL'S A GREAT DATE, but he's a square about his hair. He's got all the signs of Dry Scalp! Dull hair that a rake couldn't comb . . . and loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
NEAT SOLUTION, this 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic! Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff and other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . make your hair naturally good-looking. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . it's economical, too.
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
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Lane's men. The free people of Kansas will never accept the LeCompton constitution—not even if it means fighting the whole United States Army!"

As he finished, there was applause and shouts of approval. Amy felt all the life-warmth leave her body. Shock held her in icy paralysis. They were plotting to overthrow the United States government! There, in the next room, only feet away.

She straightened and drew a long, deep breath which drove the chill from her brain. They had to be stopped. Amy whirled up from the chair, looking around the room as if seeking invisible aid, and finally she ran to the dresser. Pulling out the top drawer, she caught up the small, oddly shaped leather case which she had been carrying upon her arrival at the hotel.

Inside the case was a heavy, self-cocking pistol. She lifted it, clamped her fingers around the grip and let her arm drop so that the weapon would be concealed in the folds of her voluminous skirt.

Stepping over the broken wine bottle, she left her room and walked noiselessly to the door at the rear. Lifting the pistol, she leveled it carefully. The door might be unlocked and if it were, she could take them by surprise. But trying the knob would warn them. Her fingers tightened on the gun butt. Lifting her free hand, she knocked.

"What's that? Who'd be at the door?" The questions were quick and startled. There was the sound of hurried movement. Stepping aside, she stood close to the wall.

The lock clicked, the door opened and there was a moment's pause. Then a man holding a gun stepped out into the hall. She pushed the pistol into his side and swept the weapon from his hand.

"Get your hands up," she said, and angry triumph sang through her voice. Her prisoner was Sax Brockett.

He turned slowly and faced her—grinning "You play dangerous games," he said.

She prodded him with the pistol muzzle. "Do exactly as I say or I'll shoot—you *traitor*. Walk backwards into the room. Keep your hands up."

He took a long backward step, the grin still shadowing the corners of his mouth. Another step, another. She was inside, her gun covering everyone in the room. "All of you stand against the wall. Hurry."

The five other men were on their feet, in ludicrous surprise or angry disbelief. "If this is another one of your jokes, Major Brockett—"

"It's not, General," Sax Brockett said and took his place near them.

The general turned, as if heeling about in a military parade, and scowled at her. He was gray-haired, grim-jawed and thin-eyed. "Young lady, stop this nonsense at once!"

"Stay where you are." Her gun moved in warning. "I've been in the next room listening to this meeting of traitors. Every one of you should be hanged for treason and I'm going to turn you over to the federal authorities."

"How?" Brockett asked, his tone strangely mild. "You've first got to get us out of this room—and there are six of us against one of you—and out of the hotel. Then you'll have to keep us from getting away while you locate the federal authorities."

"I'll manage. First, I'll take your guns. No, don't move. I'll *take* them; you won't give them to me. Line up and come toward me, one at a time. I'll shoot anyone else who leaves their place. You, first," she told the general.

He glanced at the others, stamped forward and permitted her to lift his side-arms from their holsters. "Next," Amy said crisply.

Brockett stepped toward her. His gray glance struck down at her and the depths of his eyes glistened. "I already have your gun. You can go back and stand against the wall again."

"You're already getting careless," he told her. "I might have another weapon in a shoulder holster."

"Thanks! You might, at that. Come a little closer and lift your hands high." Her glance darted at the others and she ran her hand over the outside of his broadcloth jacket. It might be difficult to discover a cleverly made under-arm holster through such heavy cloth. Her grenadine-red lips pressed firmly together and, opening his jacket, she slid her hand across his shirt, toward the shoulder.

HIS upheld arms dropped and, as she tried to step back, became two metal bands tightened around her, holding her in a grip which crushed her. She twisted wildly against him. A high, thin scream tore from her throat. Sax held her with one arm and clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Meeting's adjourned," he announced. "See you at the other place at the regular time. This hotel's out for awhile. Leave as fast as you can. Most of the people in this place are Border Ruffians—this is their district."

The other men hurried out and Sax Brockett continued to hold her, his hand clamped over her mouth, until she became exhausted. Finally he removed the hand from her mouth and, holding her in his other arm, opened the door. Her lips parted over another scream and he once more cut off the sound with his hand.

Lifting her from her feet, he carried her out of the room and down the hall to her own door. He got the door open in spite of her violent struggling and, carrying her inside put her down.

"Now." He stepped back, away from her. "Scream if you wish. But remember—you're a bad-tempered hussy who screams and breaks bottles during a quarrel."

"You—contemptible—traitor!"

The dark-ringed gray eyes thinned and dark color moved along his square jaws, but he did not speak.

"You tricked me!" Amy cried in a fresh gust of fury. "Because I was able to capture you, take you prisoner, you resorted to trickery!"

"What a violent disposition," Sax commented. "Very unpleasant in a girl." There was a glistening sheen in his eyes and, as his mouth relaxed, the corners tilted.

"If you'll quiet down, I'll give you a few painful facts. Every man who was in that room is an experienced soldier or scout. The only reason you were able to order them around—even temporarily—is because you're a woman. A man would've been dead a second after he pushed a gun into my ribs outside the door. Don't you suppose I saw your mean little fist when you snatched my pistol? But they wouldn't have taken much more—even from a woman. They'd have simply rushed you and made you behave."

"So *you* did it for them."

"Yes." The amusement on his full, strong-lined lips was part of the glow in his eyes. "I thought I might enjoy doing it alone. And I did, Amy, my queen."

"You." She stopped and her glance stirred, began to glint with dark laugh. Knowing, answering laughter. "Treason," she said evenly, "is more despicable than murder."

"You don't despise me." His arm brushed her shoulder and he bent until his face was directly above her own. "Amy," he murmured and his voice vibrated against her senses, against strange, new-born nerves.

He was touching her, his hands leaving trails of fire behind them and igniting more fires as they tightened on her shoulders. Her heart lifted, as if at his command, into great, slow strokes. Or was the shaking violence actually the beating of *his* heart? What if the huge hammer was pounding within his body. . . .

He kissed her and the giant hammer stopped beating. His mouth was shaping hers to his caress and to its demand.

Abruptly, her hands thrust up against him and freed her. "Let me go!" she said, her breath ragged as a sob. "Right now!"

"Certainly—if the queen commands." And even before her senses could steady, he turned and left the room. The door closed behind him with a click . . . a sharp, final click. . . .

* * *

When Amy left her room the next morning, she was determined to find Sax Brockett and force him to explain why he had said the public-land auction was just a poor joke. First, of course, she would make it clear that the scene of the night before had been not only childish, but absurd.

She was ready for anything the climate or the auction might produce. Her suit, with a brief jacket and street-length skirt which reached only an inch below the ankles, was of summer wool, so thin as to be almost transparent. The suit was gray, her blouse, hat and gloves lettuce-green,

and she carried a black bag to match her shoes.

In the bag was a carefully drawn map of the entire thousand acres which were to be offered at the land sale. Her father had not only had the map prepared long before she started West, but had carefully marked the sections on which she was to bid.

In the lobby, George La Salle, the proprietor, beamed at her somewhat nervously. Amy said:

"Good morning. I hope breakfast is being served because I'm going to the land auction."

"Yes, ma'am. There's a notice of it right there on the wall, near the desk."

She smiled, started for the dining room and turned back. "Is Mr. Brockett at breakfast?"

"No, ma'am." La Salle's white eyebrows were trembling violently.

"Hasn't he come down yet?"

"No. Fact is, he's not here any more. Not in this hotel, at least."

"He's—gone?"

"Yes, ma'am. Left last night."

Her lips parted and swift, inexplicable anger burned up her throat. "But where—"

She stopped as the front door swung open and a tall, young army officer strode into the lobby. Behind him were six troopers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Defiant Damosel

"EVERYONE in this lobby's to stay exactly where they are for the time being," the officer announced and moved to the desk, where he told La Salle: "Give me all your keys. I want one for every room in the house. Don't try any signalling, either. I've got other troopers outside."

The hotel man brought out a great handful of keys. "There you are, Captain. Each one's labeled."

"Thanks." The officer swung back to the troopers. "Sergeant, separate the keys for the first and second floor. Then three of you search each floor. Don't miss even a clothes closet."

"Yes, sir." The keys jangled for a moment, and then the troopers moved off in two separate groups.

La Salle leaned forward, his white brows quivering steadily. "Looking for anybody special, Captain?"

"Yes—" He broke off as he discovered Amy. She was walking toward the desk, her lashes lowered just enough to deepen the violet of her eyes, her mouth troubled and yet sultry.

She stopped before the placard announcing the government land auction and read it as though unaware of everything around her. Finishing, she regarded the printed words uncertainly, frowned and turned quickly to the desk. Her movement was so swift that her arm whirled out and struck against that of the young officer.

"Oh." She was startled, embarrassed and breathless. "I'm so sorry! I didn't see you. Please forgive me."

He had a lean face, crisp, fairish hair and wore his uniform as if born to it. "I refuse to forgive you," he said. "I'm too glad it happened." His smile was crooked and sparkling.

Amy's lashes dropped again. "You're generous, but I'm annoyed with myself. I shouldn't be so lost in my own troubles as to go around falling over other people."

"You're wrong, ma'am. It's a charming habit and one I hope you never lose." His eyes were Dutch blue and as pleasantly clear as a Spring sky. "You mentioned troubles. What are they—that is—I hope, ma'am," he added hastily, "I don't seem presumptious."

"Of course not." But she hesitated and the frown returned. "It may not seem important to you, but I'm terribly worried. My father sent me out here to act as his agent at the land auction. It's to be held today, but I don't know where the auction place is or whether an unescorted girl can attend. The notice says that it will start at ten o'clock—and it's already nine."

His crooked smile became protective and reassuring. "Let's sit down and get everything straightened out. I'm Captain Wright—Jack Wright."

Her lashes flicked away from her eyes. "I'm glad to know you, very glad. I'm Amy Demartine."

"That's a nice name," he said and led her toward a row of chairs near the windows. "Getting to the auction's very simple," he added as he sat beside her. "No problem at all—because I'll take you there. I can send the prisoner—if there is one—back with the troopers. Then we'll get a carriage and reach the auction field in fifteen minutes."

"You must know where it is! I'm certainly grateful to you for helping me."

Before he could answer, three soldiers approached and saluted. "No trace of Hartley, sir."

"Then go upstairs and help with the search there."

"Yes, sir." But as they started up the other three troopers appeared on the way down. They, too, reported: "Hartley's not in the building."

"Then he's probably not even in Osawkee. According to our information he had arranged to meet some of his accomplices here at eight-thirty this morning. The whole story must have been a fake. You can all return to camp."

The troopers went out, and Wright told Amy: "I'll have to leave you for a moment. I want to question the hotel manager. Please stay right where you are."

When he returned, his mouth was straight and tight. And she noticed that his lips were firm and almost thin. Refreshingly austere, when compared to Sax Brockett's mouth.

"I learned what I expected," he said. "No one even resembling Frank Hartley's been here during the past week."

"Who is he? What's he done?"

"He's a traitor. One of the leaders in a plan to overthrow the authority of the United States Government and set up an independent state."

Amy's throat tightened and alien nerves quivered in her wrists. He was hunting one of Sax Brockett's friends! "How could anyone set up an independent state on American soil?"

JACK WRIGHT'S mouth became even thinner. "It's fantastic, but it's happening. The crowd known as Free Staters or Free Soilers are actually planning to break away from the union. They even have their own secret army which is being trained to fight United States troops."

"They'll never succeed!"

"They could," Wright said quietly. "This man, Frank Hartley, who's called General by the Free Staters, is clever and capable. The worst of it is that some of their smartest leaders can work openly because while we know what they're doing, we can't actually prove it.

"The most dangerous man in the whole crowd is constantly laughing in our face and we can't do anything about it—not without definite proof. He goes everywhere and knows everyone socially, including the governor."

"Do you mean the governor is friendly to him? Accepts him?"

"He has to accept him. Brockett wields a lot of power because he's a well known correspondent and is backed by the biggest newspaper in New York. Every dispatch he sends is propaganda for the Free State cause."

"Brockett?" The strange nerves in her wrists began to throb. "Yes!" As she suddenly remembered, "Why, I've read many of his articles. Tom Brockett."

Wright nodded. "Out here, he's been called Sax ever since a Delaware chief named Sacoxie formally adopted him into the tribe."

Amy was silent. After getting the pistol away from her so the traitorous military board could escape, Sax Brockett had kissed her. . . .

Jack Wright took out his watch. "I'll see about a carriage. It's time to start for the auction."

She watched him stride through the door, and her grenadine-red mouth lost its brilliance. Her lashes pushed together over darkening eyes. She should have told Captain Wright of the military board meeting attended not only by General Hartley but by Sax Brockett. She had to tell him or be guilty of shielding a traitor to her own country. Yes, she would—later . . . after she had thought the situation over.

"There it is," the carriage driver called, and pulled up near a pole bearing a red auction flag. Beyond the pole were rows of plank seats, all of which were occupied. In a small, open space in front of the

seats was a wooden platform from which flew another auction flag. A solid line of standees encircled the entire scene. Puffs of dust lifted the still air and the sun was unrelenting fire.

"It looks dreadful," Amy murmured. "And there's no chance of getting seats."

"There's more than a chance of you getting one," Wright said and stepped from the carriage to help her out with firm, careful hands.

She smiled her thanks, looking up at him with eyes which the sunlight had turned to the color of pale bittersweet. His mouth was white and something stark flared across his face. Even his habitual discipline had been shaken by her nearness.

He turned, almost too quickly, and told the driver: "You're to wait here for us." Offering his arm to the girl, Wright said: "We'd better make this a fast offensive. We'll go right down to the front where you can see and hear everything. The men will fall over each other to give you a seat."

As Jack Wright had predicted, a dozen men fought to surrender their places and she accepted one near the aisle, directly in front of the auctioneer's platform. Jack Wright said: "I'd better go over to where the overflow crowd's standing. I'll stay where you can see me. Wave if you want me, and—"

"Captain," a voice broke in. "Wait a minute. I've an important message for you."

As Wright turned, Amy saw a squat, dark man with a badge pinned to his shirt. "I'm from the sheriff's office," he said. "A special, urgent communication's come from Washington."

"Thank you. I appreciate your cooperation." He bent over the girl. "Looks as if I'll have to leave you for awhile. You'll be all right here until I get back. The auction'll go on for hours."

Amy's grenadine-red lips shaped into an understanding smile. "Of course. Good-by—for a little while."

He saluted and started hurriedly toward the wagon road. Amy turned to look after him, observing the erect grace of his body and the sureness of his stride. The man who had brought the message was a short distance behind him and, as he reached the edge of the field, three other men arose and followed. He got into the carriage and they went, swiftly, to waiting ponies. When the carriage started off, they were riding behind it.

UNEASINESS touched her and she started to her feet. But, as the auctioneer's hammer banged, she sat down again. "This auction is being held at the order of and by the authority of the United States Government. A tract of one thousand acres, in parcels of one hundred and sixty acres each is to be sold to the highest bidder." The auctioneer was a tall, spare man whose skin, hair and clothes were of varying shades of gray which blanded into a single, depressing color.

Behind him stood two assistants who grinned broadly when he asked for bids on the first parcel of land. "One hundred and sixty acres in section two, northeast of Jefferson County."

Amy opened her handbag and took out the carefully marked map. The section being offered was not checked.

"I bid one-fifty an acre," someone called.

"One-fifty. I'm offered one-fifty. Going at one-fifty."

"Two!" another voice rang out.

Instantly, an angry roar came from the crowd. There were cries of: "Shut up! Sit down!" Men left their seats with their hands hovering above their guns. Somewhere behind the girl there was a violent milling, a confused scrambling, which ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Everyone returned to their place and the auctioner rang out: "Sold at one-fifty per acre to Fred Casey."

Amy stared, in amazement, at the gray man on the platform but he was continuing, blandly, "The next parcel in section 1, southeast Jefferson County—"

She turned, dazedly, to a stout man sitting next to her. "Someone bid two dollars on the first parcel and it was sold for one-fifty. And he was obviously forced to stop bidding. I don't understand."

The stout face creased with mirth. "Because he hasn't any right to bid. Every section of the thousand acres is claimed."

"How could it be? The government is selling it as public land."

"Sure, but all the land's been claimed and improved by people living in the county or—" he chuckled wheezily—"people who're saying they're residents of the county. Most of 'em live a hundred miles or more away, but they came here and drove a stake into the ground or put up a shack to show they'd improved it. Now, they'll bid whatever they like for the land and get it. All of 'em made an agreement to let each one buy the section he'd claimed."

"But that's illegal. Dishonest!"

She became aware of the auctioneer's voice again. "Section 1, Southeast Jefferson County. I'm bid two dollars—going at two dollars."

Amy looked hurriedly at her map and shot to her feet. "Four dollars," she cried.

The auctioneer stopped in the middle of the word and stared at her, his mouth still open. A roar of angry sound lifted around her but she repeated:

"I bid four dollars."

Abruptly, the people near her moved away and half-a-dozen armed men surrounded her. "Look, lady." One of them thrust his head forward and spoke in determinedly kind tones. "You can't bid, so don't try."

"I certainly can bid. This is a public auction."

"It's not exactly public, to our mind. Besides, women don't belong at land auctions. It's a place for men who know what's going on and take their chances. Why—" His voice lifted authoritatively. "A woman can't vote. Nobody without a vote is entitled to bid on public land."

Amy's mouth lost its curves and her black lashes pushed together. "You're making that up to stop me. I don't believe here's any such rule—but I won't argue about it because I'm acting as my father's agent. *He* is a voter. His name," she added, complacently, "is Mr. Addison Demartine of New York. *He* is buying the land."

"Well, we won't allow it, anyhow. Sit down and keep still—"

"That's just what she is not going to do." Another voice cut through the words.

Sax Brockett pushed his way through the group around her and his hand rested on the butt of his holstered gun. "Before anyone starts shooting," he said. "They'd better understand they can't get away with it, even if I'm one against a hundred. I'll get some of you before I'm finished.

"Besides, there'll be such an unholy row kicked up, you'll all have to get out of the country. The paper I work for will force the governor to act—force them to keep at it until they've rounded up the last man involved. Then this whole crooked deal will come out and the claim of every settler in the county will be declared void."

"This is our land. We've got the right to it."

"How'd you get it? By driving a stake into the ground? Better forget all about it and let the lady bid."

They hesitated, faces taut and hands hovering above their guns. But the auctioneer who had heard Sax Brockett's speech, shouted: "If this disturbance continues, I'll postpone the auction." Slowly, the threatening men shifted away and disappeared into the crowd.

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"Four dollars!" Amy called, triumphantly.

"Four-fifty!" came in a furious roar.

"Five!" the girl answered.

The bid was not raised and the section was sold to "Addison Demartine through his appointed agent, Miss Amy Demartine."

Sax Brockett, sitting on his heels at her feet, looked up at her with a one-sided smile. "This is great," he said. "One small girl is wrecking the cut-and-dried bargain all these would-be land grabbers had cooked up."

HEN the auction ended, Amy had bought four adjoining sections. The field was emptying as people hurried to the road, their feet sending up dust which hung like a curtain in the still air. Amy gave her check to the auctioneer and received an official receipt which stated that the deeds would be delivered within one week.

"You did a job all right," Brockett said and the depths of his gray eyes glistened. "I've got a buckboard waiting—but you must have a carriage here, too. Which one should we go back in?"

"I haven't a carriage, though. I—expect someone to call for me."

"Then that's settled. It's the buckboard."

She hesitated and her lips parted over quick words. But she held them back and said: "Yes, and thank you, again." It was more than strange that Captain Wright hadn't returned. Those men who had followed him when he left.... Something had happened to him. Something dreadful and violent.

Sax Brockett signalled the buckboard driver. When they were riding toward Osawkee, he said: "How about our having dinner together?"

"No, thank you. Please ask the driver to go faster. I want to get back as quickly as possible."

"Because you'd like to get away from me?"

She turned her head and regarded him with level, measuring eyes. "Why not? I don't like traitors."

"Traitors?" he repeated with bland astonishment. "You can't think I'm one. Which reminds me, I forgot to tell you I'm a newspaper man, sent out here to—"

"I know all about you," she broke in.

The buckboard swung in to the wooden sidewalk before the hotel, and Amy got up quickly, intending to step out before he could help her. But he was already on the sidewalk, waiting.

"Thank you." She hurried into the hotel. She would have someone ride to the army camp, inquire about Captain Wright.

She turned toward the desk but someone stepped into her path. A tall man in an army uniform. Her glance flicked up, unbelievingly. "You're here!" she cried softly. "I was afraid. After you'd left—"

"I know," Jack Wright said. "It was a trick to get me away. As soon as I was out of sight of the field, three men with drawn guns stopped the carriage. They disarmed us and ordered the driver to turn across the range and to a cabin—looked like a ranch section house. Then they locked us in and stood guard outside. About an hour ago, they let us out. I knew the auction was over by that time, but sent the carriage out to the field—just in case—and came here to wait for you."

"The fact that they freed you proves they didn't want you at the auction. And with good reason. Any army officer who witnessed the auction would have made a report to Washington. They—"

"Well, Captain Wright! How are you?" Sax Brockett came toward them, his smile as warm as his greeting. "Haven't seen you for quite awhile."

"Hello, Brockett," Wright said, briefly, and turned back pointedly to Amy. "I'm overdue at camp. I was wondering—" his crooked, sparkling smile appeared—"if you'll be busy tomorrow. I can get away at any time after twelve, noon."

"No, I've nothing at all to do. Come early—around two—and you can show me Osawkee. I've seen almost nothing of town."

"Fine. I'll be here." He pulled on his hat and gave her a gay, farewell salute.

"Nice hombre," Sax Brockett murmured.

Amy looked straight ahead, as though neither seeing nor hearing him, and started for the stairs.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Is Truth?

TWILIGHT darkening her room reminded Amy that dinner time was approaching, and she frowned at the thought of the one-table hotel dining room. She would write her father, giving him a detailed account of the auction and the land she had purchased.

A knock came from the door and as she went to answer it, the brief train of her gown whispered over the carpet. The gown, of tree-green satin, was a smooth, tight-fitting sheath from shoulders to hips where it flared into a full, long skirt. The neckline was deep and the sleeves brief enough to reveal the luminous fairness of her skin.

She forced her lips into the shape of an impersonal smile. "Yes—" She stopped and inexplicable, reasonless anger flared through her. Sax Brockett was standing before her with a package in his hand.

"Hello," he said and his glance ran over her finely moulded body before it lifted to her face. There was a sheen-like glisten in the depths of his dark-ringed gray eyes. "I figured I ought to replace the bottle of wine you smashed. It wouldn't have been broken if you hadn't thrown it at me."

"I threw—What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you, inside." He stepped over the threshold, and grinned as she moved away. Closing the door, he carried the package to the table and unwrapped a bottle of vintage burgandy. "Even if you are bad-tempered, I feel responsible for wasting perfectly good wine. Especially since I just missed being brained by that bottle."

"Please take your wine and go."

"Where are the glasses? Or did you break them, too? No, there they are on the stand." He placed the glasses on the table and opened the wine. "Had a tough time finding just the same vintage," he said, filling the glasses.

"I've asked you to leave."

"You don't really want me to." He handed her a glass, and when she refused to accept it, put it down and lifted his own drink. "It's good. Why not try it?"

She was silent, but the flaring anger had hardened into a fury which stabbed into her brain like hot metal prongs.

His grin disappeared. "Amy," Brockett said, "please let me tell you what the situation really is in this part of the territory. When a majority of the people living in the Kansas Territory—which is still claimed by Missouri—wanted to go into the Union as a non-slavery state, the Missouri pro-slavery crowd staged a fake election. They kept the legitimate voters away from the polls, went into Kansas and voted.

"Most of them voted dozens of times under different names. The fraudulent votes elected a pro-slavery legislature. That legislature drew up and passed a constitution—called the LeCompton constitution, declaring that Kansas was pro-slavery. And they're seeking admission to the union on that status.

"The citizens of Kansas refuse to recognize the constitution. And they're fighting for the liberty guaranteed every American citizen."

Amy declared: "I can't believe such a thing could happen in the United States. Election by force. Are you sure? Besides, why haven't the people produced the election returns and the poll books to prove their case?"

"Because they can't. The Border Ruffians removed the books and returns twenty-four hours after the bogus legislature was elected."

"Who removed them? To where?"

"One of the Border-Ruffian election officials, probably. And no one's been able to discover where they are."

"It's shocking!" Amy said and her eyes were dark purple flames. "I don't blame the people for fighting. They can't do anything else."

"Exactly. Nor do they consider themselves traitors."

She moved to the table, took up the glass of wine and drank part of it. "I apologize for calling you that."

His gray eyes stirred and their depths glinted. "I'll accept the apology a little later."

"Still," she said, quickly. "There are a lot of other things I don't understand. When I overheard the meeting you at-

tended, I understood that someone named General Lane is engaged in actual fighting with the Border Ruffian forces. Yet, you're *here*."

"We've changed our plans. Instead of fighting the United States Army, if necessary, we'll convince the public not only here but all over the country, that the LeCompton constitution is a fraud."

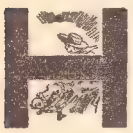
"How?"

The corners of his strongly full lips tilted. "That's something I can't tell you."

"Then," Amy said in suddenly lowered tones, "you don't trust me."

"Of course I don't. Queens are born opportunists, among other things."

Her mouth straightened, but light flickered across her eyes and glinted against their darkness in knowing acknowledgement.



E PUT his empty glass on the table. His arm, brushing against her shoulder, sent shock fleeting through her. Her heart lifted in a strangely slow, giant stroke which shook her senses into confusion. She was plunging downward and there was no end to the space beneath her.

"Amy," Brockett murmured. His mouth took hers, shaping it to the pattern of his kiss. His arms, claiming her, were also commanding. The rhythm of her heart changed again and became flailing wings within her. But she was still aware of a driving, pounding throb, which was the beating of his heart. She was conscious of its power, of the warmth it sent through him, and of the surging, reckless vitality which was an even deeper part of him.

His lips left hers slowly. Still holding her, he said: "I knew you wouldn't tell Captain Wright of the military board meeting. Just as I knew things had to be like this between us."

She straightened and stepped back out of his arms. "I—intended to tell him. I'm not sure that I won't, any more than I'm sure the Free Staters' story is the right one."

His eyes went still. "I wasn't giving you the Free Staters story. I was giving you facts I checked and re-checked until they could no longer be doubted. And it's not pleasant to be called a liar—even by a beautiful girl." He was looking at her coldly, strangely.

Amy's head tilted and her lashes pushed together. Hot-pronged anger raked along her nerves. "You must be accustomed to using—harsh language. I didn't—"

"It doesn't matter," Brockett broke in crisply. "You put over the idea. Good night, ma'am." He opened the door with a jerk, stopped and looked back at her. "Don't throw the bottle again. You'll just waste the wine because I'm good at ducking. . . ."

Shortly after breakfast, the hotel porter came to the door of Amy's room with a florist's box and a note. "Captain Wright sent these, ma'am. There's a trooper waiting downstairs to take back your answer."

Amy opened the box and lifted out a huge bouquet of fragrant black violets. With the bouquet was a card on which Wright had written:

Because they match your eyes.

She smiled and pressed the cool flowers against her face before reading the note which said:

We could see more of the country on horseback. Osawkee's small enough to be explored in half an hour. If you want to ride, I'll bring a saddle horse for you.

"Tell the trooper 'yes'," Amy said. "That I'd like to ride. No, wait." She hurried to the desk, wrote a brief note and gave it to the porter. "And send someone up to get my riding clothes. I want them pressed immediately."

When Jack Wright arrived, at two o'clock, she was dressed for the saddle in smart black breeches and coat, gleaming boots and a small black riding hat.

As she crossed the lobby, George La Salle leaned on the counter and stared. Amy grinned one-sidedly. It would be silly to wear a skirt over the breeches while riding through the rough country around Osawkee. And besides, an army camp couldn't possibly be supplied with side-saddles.

Wright beamed and she put out her hand in greeting.

"This is exactly what I've wanted to do," she said. "Thanks for suggesting it."

His grip tightened, for a moment before he released it. As they moved toward the door, it opened and Sax Brockett said: "Miss Demartine—good afternoon! And Captain Wright. How are you?"

They did not pause while they returned his greeting. Outside, Wright told her: "Brockett seems to be bobbing a little too often. Wish I knew why."

She did not answer. Angry warmth was moving up her throat and she was remembering his lips as they had shaped hers into their own pattern.

He lifted her into the saddle and mounted his horse. "We'll ride down the main street to get onto the wagon road leading north," he said. "You can see almost all of the town that way."

THE day was warm, but a pleasantly cool breeze swept down from the hills. The thrusting sun brought out the strong, clear scent of the earth and the sky was a clear, delicate blue.

"This is lovely," Amy said as they topped the first ridge of foothills. "I hadn't realized how beautiful this country is."

"Let's get down for a few minutes and give the horses a breather," Wright said. "We can sit on that fallen tree trunk and get a good view of the valley."

They sat side by side in silence and looked at the green land below. But Amy was increasingly conscious of Jack Wright and knew that he was even more aware of her.

"Yesterday, you spoke of the Free-Staters' plan to rebel against the United States," she said suddenly. "And last night, I heard someone else discussing the trouble between the Free Staters and the pro-slavery crowd—the Border Ruffians. According to his version, the legislature which drew up the LeCompton constitution was elected by fraud and violence."

"Whoever told you that was wrong," Jack Wright said crisply. "There's been no proof of fraud offered."

"Still . . . ." The girl's delicately lined brows moved together. "How can they offer proof the pro-slavery group stole the poll books and returns?"

"That's not true, either. Nobody knows who's got them or what happened to them. The pro-slavery party has worked steadily to find some trace of them. The federal government made a search and could find no clue as to how they disappeared."

"Naturally, whoever took them isn't going to admit it!" Amy told him. "But the fact that they're gone does give strength to the Free Staters' story. Maybe it even proves them right."

He shook his head. "You'll hear a dozen wild stories about the election and the LeCompton constitution every day in the week and they'll all be different."

She did not speak but the lines between her brows deepened.

Wright chuckled. "Don't look like that," he murmured. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Yes, it is. Fixed elections shouldn't be tolerated anywhere in the United States."

"You're right there. Suppose you could talk to a man who had been one of the officials at the election. What if he told

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you everything that happened at the polls, how the votes were counted, the way the returns were locked in the safe from which they disappeared? Would that convince you?"

"It might."

"Then—" Wright hesitated. "I'll take you to such a man right now—if you want to make our ride a little longer than we'd intended."

"Now? Today?"

"Yes. I can tell you this much because I'm sure the information is as safe with you as with me. The Free Staters don't want the poll books and returns to be found. They've driven many of the election officials out of the territory. One was killed and another wounded. But the chief clerk has been placed under the protection of the United States Army. He's in hiding and the army's making sure no one gets too close to his hiding place. We'll go there and you can talk to him."

"Yes. I'd like to." She looked up at him quickly, her grenadine-red lips curving, her dark violet eyes lighting.

"You lovely thing!" The words came in a low rush of sound, as if torn from his throat. He bent and kissed her. The touch of his mouth was steady, sure sunlight. The clean, masculine scent of his skin reached into her senses and made her relax against him.

He ended the kiss almost abruptly. "Please don't misunderstand," he said. "I didn't mean to do anything like that—" He stopped. "I just went off my head for a moment. I wish you could forget it."

"Of course I will," Amy said, and her voice was very gentle. But the depths of her eyes stirred and glinted with darkly knowing laughter.

CHAPTER SIX

Together Forever

MY and Jack Wright rode back to the wagon trail and turned east. Half an hour later, Wright told her: "We go north again here, across range." They traveled at a fast canter until they reached the hills, when they slowed their mounts to a walk and Wright led the way up a sharp, roughly wooded slope. The ponies' hoofs slid on shifting rock as they descended on the other side and, when they reached the bottom a trooper, holding a rifle over his arm, appeared from nowhere.

Wright identified himself and they were allowed to go on, along a faint trail through a thick wood where a second trooper challenged them. They emerged into a clearing. There, Amy saw a small, stoutly built cabin.

"This is it," Jack Wright said.

They reined in and the cabin door snapped open. An armed soldier appeared and, seeing the officer, saluted. "Didn't expect you again. There was no word that you were coming."

"I didn't send any. Thought I'd visit McClean and help to keep him cheered up."

He helped Amy to the ground, and the trooper held the door open for them to enter.

Inside was a big, well lighted room, furnished crudely but comfortably. Hurrying to greet them was a tall, thin-faced man with very black hair and bluish stubble on his jaws.

"Howdy, howdy!" he cried, heartily. "Sure is great to see you—and the young lady. More than I'd ever have hoped could happen. Or am I dreaming, Captain?"

"No. This is Miss Amy Demartine—Jim McClean. I told her something about you and she became so interested she wanted to meet you. I was sure you'd want me to bring her out."

"You were right. Won't you sit down, ma'am? The chairs are fairly comfortable. This one right here's about the best. Say —" as Amy smilingly accepted—"You certainly brought me a treat for the eyes. Hope you don't mind my saying so, ma'am, but you're the prettiest girl I've seen."

Jack Wright said: "Miss Demartine'd like to hear about the election that the Free Staters claim was fraudulent. She's been told a lot of nonsense and is pretty confused about what's going on here."

Jim McClean's deep-set gray eyes darted nervously. He rubbed his bluish jaw. "As chief clerk at the election, I saw that the voting was strictly legal.

Recognized most of the voters—they were people I knew and residents of the Territory with full right to vote. The election went off without trouble, but when the results were announced a gang of Free Staters began to whip up trouble, charging it had been crooked.

"I didn't take the row too seriously, but figured it might be best to be sure the poll books and returns were in a safe place. I'd left them in the safe in the store where the election had been held. The safe belonged to the store-owner but he'd let me use it. Well, ma'am, when I went to get them, so's to put them in a better protected place, they were gone. Just gone. Nobody knew anything about them. The store-owner hadn't opened the safe at all."

"He could have, though—" Amy began, but the crack of a gun smashed through her words.

Jack Wright shot to his feet and leaped for the door. The gunfire had sounded close—close enough to have come from directly outside the cabin.

"They've got through!" Jim McClean shouted and his voice lifted to squeaking peak. "They're here! Where'll I hide?" Without waiting for an answer, he lunged toward the bed and crawled under it.

Amy started after Wright, but was stopped before she could reach the door. Two hard-jawed men, carrying leveled guns, were entering the cabin. "Get back, lady," one of them said. "You can sit down if you want to. Where's McClean?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, yes, she does." Sax Brockett cello-deep voice chuckled. "But never mind. She'd rather tell me."

He was just outside the open door, and in front of him, hands lifted was Jack Wright. The officer marched in stiffly, Brockett's gun against his back. His face was metal still and his mouth colorless.

"Don't be frightened, Amy," he said evenly. "These men won't hurt you. Brockett's in charge of them and there are some things even a traitor doesn't do."

"What things?" Sax Brockett demanded. But his eyes were on the girl and even now, there was dark, glistening laughter in their depths. "I might have to *force* her to tell us where Jim McClean's hiding—and make you a liar."

Wright said, "If you must be funny, tell me how you got in here, past the troopers spread around this area."

"We played Indian. The soldiers on guard duty didn't even know we were around until we jumped them, took their guns and tied them up. We gagged 'em, too. Just to be sure there wasn't any noise to tell you what was going on."

"You know what this means," Jack Wright said. "Attacking and disarming United States soldiers is a serious offense."

"Sure. But we're serious, too. Bring McClean out. Never mind—look around," he told his companions. "He's probably under the bed. That's about what he'd do."

ONE of the armed men knelt, peered under the bed and dragged Jim McClean into view. "I haven't got the poll books," McClean shrilled as he was dragged to his feet. "I haven't got them. I—I sent them to Missouri."

"So you *did* take them!" The words tore from Amy's lips.

"Sure he did," Sax Brockett said. "Start searching this place, boys. He hasn't sent them anywhere. He's got them hidden right here. He wouldn't take a chance on letting them out of his hands."

"No, I tell you I sent them to Missouri the day after the elections."

"Shut up and stand against the wall behind you. Stand quietly. You, too, Captain Wright. I'm keeping both of you covered."

The other two men began a swift, destructive search of the cabin. Tables were taken apart, boards lifted from the floor, pillows ripped open. The room was a scene of complete wreckage when the searchers finally admitted that the poll books were not in the cabin.

"We'll have a look outside," Sax Brockett announced. "Come on, all of you."

Wright, McClean and Amy filed out and were told to stand directly before the door.

Lying on the ground near them was the trooper who had been on duty inside

the cabin. His arms and legs were bound and a neckerchief held a gag in his mouth. Amy turned toward him, but Brockett gestured her away.

"He's not hurt. The shot you heard came from his gun. He saw us about a minute before we reached the cabin." He was glancing around the clearing, studying the log building and the ground near it. "That's quite a good-sized wood-pile," he said, finally, nodding toward a stack of logs near the rear of the cabin.

The men tore the sawed log-lengths apart until they reached a patch of earth which, protected from the sun, was soft and moist. "Get a shovel," Brockett ordered. "Must be one inside. We'll dig up that patch of ground."

The shovel was brought, and it cut easily into the soft earth. In what seemed only seconds, they struck ringingly into a buried object. The ground was scraped away even more hastily and a box marked *Candles* was uncovered.

But when it was ripped open, instead of candles, they found poll books and election returns!

Sax Brockett brought them to the girl and said: "There they are. This is going to give us more proof than we'll need." His glance flicked to Wright. "Like to examine them, Captain?"

"I certainly would!" Jack Wright snapped. "But I want McClean under guard first. The theft of these records is enough to send him to federal penitentiary. Untie that soldier and I'll order him to take charge of the prisoners."

Sax Brockett carried the poll books into the house. A table was retrieved from the wreckage and the records placed on them. "You'll find them interesting reading, Captain," Brockett said. "Maybe Miss Demartine would like a close-up, too. Step right up, ma'am."

"Thanks." Her chin lifted a little as she moved past and she avoided his glance.

Wright flipped over the page, straightened and heeled about to face Sax Brockett. "I'm satisfied. I didn't imagine any fraud could be so brazen. My apologies, sir."

Brockett grinned and put out his hand. "You've nothing to apologize for. You merely did your job as a good soldier."

"Then I'll have McClean taken into town at once. Amy—Miss Demartine—are you ready to leave?"

"Leave?" the girl repeated. "Why—" She looked directly at Sax.

His glance met hers, held it . . . and the depths of his gray eyes held a sheen-like glisten. "There's no reason why you can't go over the stuff from beginning to end, ma'am. I'll ride back to Osawkee with you."

Her grenadine-red lips curved and laughter like darkness flickered across her eyes. Still smiling, she turned to Jack Wright. "Do you mind?"

Wright's face closed. "Of course not. It that's what you want. Good-by, ma'am," he said and there was finality and abrupt understanding in his tones.

Amy at once bent over the open poll book and began to read busily. She remained absorbed until the cabin was enveloped in silence which meant that all the others were gone. And then she was waiting, just as she knew Sax Brockett was waiting.

He finally broke the taut silence. "All right," he said. "Why don't you ask me how we found the cabin and why we found it so soon after Wright brought you to it?"

"I'll ask, if you think I should. Why?"

"You've probably already guessed. We followed you. I knew you were going riding with Jack Wright and there was more than a chance he was so dazzled he'd make some special gesture such as letting you in on McClean's whereabouts. You led us right to him."

"Then you should be glad that I came to Osawkee. See what I did—not only for you, but for the Free State people."

"Glad isn't quite the right word," Sax murmured and moved toward her, kept on moving until she was in his arms. "Try to think of a better one."

Her heart slowed and lifted into a gigantic, shaking stroke. "How about—" His mouth came down on her lips and stopped the rest of her words.

His kiss shaped her mouth into the pattern of his and sent her plunging through endless space. But at last, her heartbeats turned into gently flailing wings of fire.

THE END

RANGELAND ROMANCES *Pin-Up Girl*

Sure as shootin' her target's romance
When Cupid's cute helper takes aim.
Though no beau in sight has a getaway chance—
.....

To finish the limerick in this February contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-Up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this February contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on January 26, 1950. The judges' decision will be final. See page 44 for the winner of November contest.

BUCKAROO on the BRIDAL PATH

By Val Gendron

GLORIA glanced at Martin's clean-cut profile, outlined against the silvery sagebrush, and thought he was too handsome for his own good.

He saw her watching him. "Hi, honey." He grinned.

Gloria grinned back, but it was a wicked, mischievous grin. "You call all the girls honey?"

"Yep," he answered complacently. "It's much better that way. Then I never call you Helen by mistake, or call Frances Gloria—or something stupid like that. Call 'em all honey and you're safe."

Gloria nodded. "If you're so afraid of getting married, I hear tell the best way to avoid it is not to go out with any girls at all," she said flatly.

Martin laughed. "Safety in numbers, honey."

"I know," Gloria cut in. "A different girl every night. Honestly, Mart, I think you change your girl-friends oftener than you do your kerchiefs!"

He leaned toward her. "What's the matter, honey? Jealous?"

Of course she was jealous. There wasn't any doubt about it. Gloria had practically grown up with Martin, and in the new West where playmates were rare, they had been inseparable.

That was before the boom hit Wilkinstown and there was an influx of new settlers. Probably Gloria was the only person in town who hated the boom. It had changed Mart. He discovered how handsome he was. Now he never talked about the little spread up in the hills where he planned to settle down. All he cared about was a rip-roaring good time.

Gloria glanced at him again. It was no wonder women flocked to him. He was tall, broad shouldered, slim hipped. His every movement had the grace of latent strength. There wasn't a trace of weakness in his clean-cut jaw, and his blue eyes were as steady and laughing as a girl's most romantic dream.

He chuckled at her silence. "Don't be jealous, honey. Don't I save every Thursday night for you?"

Gloria turned her horse's head abruptly. As a moonlight romantic ride, this evening was definitely a flop.

"You certainly do, Mart," she called over her shoulder. "And it's very generous of you!" She put heels to her horse and galloped back toward town.

Behind her she could hear the heavy pounding of Matt's big white horse, Silver. A thrill of excitement coursed through her veins. She bent low over her pony's head, urged it forward.

The horse's feet flashed sparks as they tore recklessly over the rocky road. Mart was gaining on her. Actually, Gloria knew he would. Her small pony was no match for his big stallion. But the very fact of her being pursued through the night, made her blood pound fast in her pulses, quickened the beat of her heart.

Mart was pulling up fast. She could feel the breath of Silver. He reached out, grabbed the reins from her, and pulled her pony to a halt.

"You hot-headed little fool!" he cried. Still panting from the exertion and excitement of the race, he pulled her to him,

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

Cuddly Gloria figured out a sure-fire way to halter-break petticoat-chasing Mart.

♥ ♥

"Don't be jealous, honey. Don't I save every Thursday night for you?"

kissed her competently. His arms crushing her against him were all bone and muscle, his lips demanding and assured.

Yet, as he held her, he gentled. The rough, brute strength of his caress softened; his lips got tender.

"Gloria, honey," he whispered. "Don't get mad. You're different from all the rest. You're my first girl. You shouldn't ever get mad."

Right then and there, Gloria made up her mind. She was going to marry Mart if it was the last thing she did!

"Mad?" She laughed. "Why on earth should I be mad?"

He looked down at her, puzzled. "I thought you were jealous."

"Who—me?"

"This is Thursday night," he replied sullenly. "I always go out with you on Thursday nights, and for my book you were acting jealous!"

"Oh, come, Mart," she cried. "We've known each other too long to indulge in any silly acting business. We're both of us perfectly free, you know—you to go out with whomever you like, and the same for me."

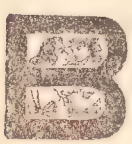
"Yes. But you never go out with anyone else," he reminded her complacently.

Gloria smiled. Mart had neatly put his finger on the very thing she intended to remedy. The whole trouble was—he was entirely too sure of her. Tonight was the very last time he would ever look at her with such complete assurance.

She picked up the reins. "I really must be getting home." She smiled at him. "Look, the moon's set. It must be very late."

He rode along beside her. "I'm glad you weren't really mad, honey," he said calmly. "I wouldn't like it if you turned female on me and put me through the course some of these gals do."

"Don't worry, Mart," she assured him gently. "I'm only a simple country girl, and I don't know any smart female tricks."



UT there isn't a woman born who isn't endowed with her fair share of wit and ingenuity for the difficult business of landing a husband. Gloria had only to apply herself. It wasn't hard. Her job at the bank gave her plenty of opportunity to meet all the eligible young bachelors around. And Gloria had her own share of good looks, too.

Her hair was a blonde mass of tiny ringlets and her eyes a gentle, clear blue that in the shadows shaded to deep violet. Her complexion was clear and creamy, her figure slender and supple, and she came—she knew—just as high as a man's heart.

Two could play at the game of being out every single night of the week. There was Clifford Brown, who owned the stagecoach line; and there was Hadley Wilson, the cashier at the bank; and young Reginald White, the son of the biggest rancher around; and Clarence O'Reilly, who ran the local honkatonk. Oh, there were plenty of men to chose from.

It didn't take Gloria more than half the morning until she had every night of the week taken—including Thursday night.

It was fun, too. Gloria discovered happily that none of the men who took her out those first few nights took her as casually as Mart did. The compliments fell as thick and fast as snowflakes in an arctic blizzard, and Gloria revelled in them.

"You're lovely," Cliff breathed. "You're the loveliest girl I've ever been out with. . . ."

Hadley smiled shyly at her. "I've been wanting to take you out for over a year, but I thought you wouldn't ever go out with anyone but Mart. You know, Gloria, you and I could have a wonderful life together. . . ."

"Sure and you're as beautiful and as fresh as the morning dew. A sight to gladden the heart of a man his whole life through," Clarence O'Reilly declared in his rich brogue. . . .

"Gosh, Gloria," Reginald murmured, his lips close to her ear. "Some folks think I was born lucky, my father owning that big ranch. But if a man can't have the woman of his heart, nothing else matters. . . ."

Thursday night it was even more fun. It was Clarence O'Reilly who came to take her out. He and Mart walked up the wooden sidewalk to her house almost side by side.

"You've made a mistake, my bucko."

Clarence laughed. "The lady's stepping out with me tonight."

"Oh, no." Mart laughed easily. "This is Thursday night. Gloria always goes out with me Thursdays."

Clarence fingered the flower in his buttonhole. "Why don't you trot on down to that fine establishment of mine? You'll find girls aplenty there—and you're well known." He smiled maliciously. "You see enough of my girls, anyhow."

"You talk big," Mart said slowly. "But tonight I'm going out with Gloria."

Clarence rocked complacently back and forth on his heels. "Now, why don't you be asking the lady which of us she prefers?"

Mart grinned. "Better start walking then, O'Reilly. Gloria's been my girl all along."

But Gloria, a sly smile on her lips, linked her arm through Clarence's. "I really promised him, Mart," she apologized.

"But this is Thursday night," he declared.

"I'm sorry, darling, I forgot. Forgive me?"

Under the circumstances there wasn't much else he could do. But whether he forgave her or not, Gloria didn't know, for Clarence swept her down the walk and out of sight.

The next morning, bright and early, Mart was waiting for her when she left the house on her way to work. "Hey, what was the idea, standing me up last night?" he demanded.

"Gosh, darling, I just forgot," Gloria murmured contritely, but her eyes were laughing.

"Forgot my eye!" Mart growled. "I'll bet you planned it!"

"Oh, darling, how can you say such things!"

He blocked her path. "My name isn't *darling*. It's Mart. Remember?"

A smile curved the corners of Gloria's lips. "But, darling, it's a trick I learned from you. You know how you call everybody honey? Well, I call everybody darling."

"I don't like it," he said flatly.

She laughed merrily. "I'm sorry, darling. But I do want to thank you for one thing. I never knew what fun it was to go out every single night in the week with a different man. Thanks so much!"

He turned livid, then regarded her soberly. His blue eyes were puzzled and confused. "Is this an act?"

Gloria lifted her face, looked him straight in the eye. "Is it an act with you to go out with a different girl every night?"

"No."

"Well, there you have the answer to your own question." She smiled brightly. "Now, let me past. I'll be late for work and Hadley won't like it."

"Hadley?"

"Mr. Hadley Wilson, the cashier. You know, Mart, he's practically proposed and Mr. Arnold says he'll be a vice-president any day now."

"I suppose you call him darling, too."

"Of course, darling. Now I really must go."

He laid a stubborn hand on her arm. "First, what about next Thursday? I want to know. I had a rotten time last night sitting home alone while you were with that cheap honkatonk owner."

"You mustn't talk about Clarence that way," she reproached him. "He's really very nice. He took me buggy riding and then we stopped at his place and he let me play the tables—and, Mart, I won forty dollars! Isn't that grand?"

"What about next Thursday?"

"You aren't being nice at all." She pouted. "Clarence told me some very interesting stories about you. But as far as I know, next Thursday's open, darling," she added innocently. . . .

OF COURSE, however, it wasn't. The week sped quickly by . . . and, once again, handsome Mart came swinging confidently up the walk. "Tonight's our night, honey." He grinned down at her.

Gloria pretended deep dismay. "Why, darling, don't tell me it's Thursday night!"

"It sure is," he declared stoutly, but she could see the confidence draining out of him like water out of a sponge.

"I guess I forgot again," she said slowly with mock regret.

"Who is it this time?" he demanded

angrily. "Tom, Dick or Harry! It's getting so you change your men oftener than you do your hat!"

Gloria smoothed the ruffles of her full skirt. "Well," she began and hesitated.

"Don't tell me you can't even remember his name!" Mart shouted.

Gloria picked up her cue. "Well, there are a lot of them. It seems a girl can't keep her men straight in a town this size. It used to be different, darling, when there were just the two of us."

"Don't *darling* me!" he roared. "I'm not one of the silly mob that's been showing you around town. I'm Martin, Martin, Martin!"

Gloria looked up at him from under long lashes, repeated a line he'd delivered to her some weeks back with minor variations. "What's the matter, darling? Jealous?"

His face grew bright with anger. "Jealous! Who, me?"

"Yes, darling, you. No one else is carrying on about a thing."

Mart groaned as Reginald White drove up with a high-stepping pair of bays hitched to a fancy, fringed-top surrey. As Reginald climbed down, Mart grabbed her arm.

"You're not going out with that animated bankrole, are you?"

"But I promised him," Gloria protested.

"You promised me, too." Mart frowned.

Gloria smiled triumphantly. "But, Mart," she whispered slyly. "He has a fringed-top surrey. You never took me riding in a surrey. Besides—" she read his lines back to him again—"you're in a class of your own. You shouldn't be jealous. You were my first boy-friend, and I'll always think of you kindly."

Mart let out something that sounded like a cross between a groan and a bellow.

She laid a soft hand on his arm. "I thought we agreed," she said gently, "that we were both free and could go out with whomever we pleased."

Reginald was beside them. "Hello, Gloria." He beamed. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Gloria threw up her hands. "I seem to have two of you for tonight."

Reginald smiled with assurance backed up by his father's ranch. "That's easily settled. Just make a choice, dear. I'm perfectly willing to abide by your decision."

"Well, I'm not!" Mart shouted. "I played into that deal last week and was left holding the bag!"

"Maybe," Reginald suggested airily, "the lady doesn't like your company. If she's hinting—and you said it happened last week, too—then it's high time, old man, you caught on."

Mart doubled his big fists, glared down at Reginald. "Don't you old man me!"

Reginald quailed before Mart's big aggressive form, the anger flashing from his eyes, but rallied in a moment. "I don't want to fight you. You're bigger than I am. But don't think you can bully me. If Gloria doesn't want to go out with you, you'll have to beat me first before I'll permit it."

Reginald's courage brought Mart to a halt. In spite of his size and strength, he'd never been a bully. But though he was no longer eager to fight Reg, he was still boiling and seething with anger against Gloria.

"Fight with you over Gloria!" he roared. "I wouldn't go out with her again if she begged me on her knees!"

"What's the fuss about, then?" Reginald asked, taking Gloria's arm in his.

"Nobody's making a fuss!" Mart shouted. "I don't know why you want to go out with her. There's no distinction to it—she's been going out with every man in town! Gloria used to be a nice kid, but she's turned into nothing but a cheap flirt and a gold-digger."

"Now look here," Reginald began.

But he didn't get far. For suddenly Gloria wilted under Mart's attack and her face puckered as if she was about to cry.

"I don't see," she stammered, "why it makes me a cheap flirt to go out every night with a different fellow when you've been going out with a different girl every night. You didn't seem to think it made you cheap!"

"That's different," Mart said angrily.

"I don't see how," Gloria said in a muffled voice. "I was only trying to make you see how it was for me . . . and now all you do is call me names."

She turned suddenly into the shelter of Reginald's arms and began to sob.

"Look what you've done," Reginald

said disgustedly. "You're an awful fool, Mart. Gloria's a swell kid and you treated her miserably. Go on away, won't you?"

"Tell him to go away, honey," Mart said.

IT WAS like a merry-go-round. Gloria had started this whole business, but she hadn't expected it to be quite such an on-again, off-again deal. She sprang out of his arms. *"Honey!"* she cried. "You call all the girls honey, *darling,* and I'm good and sick of being called honey along with a thousand, million others!"

"Don't you *darling* me!" he snapped back.

"Listen you two," Reginald cut in. "Either kiss and make up, or let Gloria come driving with me."

Gloria moved toward him resolutely. "I'll come with you," she said primly.

"Go ahead!" Mart shouted. "I'm just as glad I learned what kind of girl you were before I married you!"

"Married!" She spun back. "Whoever mentioned matrimony? I thought you were the town's perennial bachelor!"

Reginald tugged at her. "Gloria. I'm putting in my proposal right now."

Gloria turned toward him. His face was glowing with love and devotion. He'd make a good husband; he was everything a girl could want. Only—she wasn't in the least in love with him.

"You can't marry him!" Mart said.

"Why not?"

"Because you're in love with me, you silly, little fool," he said, almost tenderly.

"Don't be too sure." She smiled.

"Okay, okay." He grinned suddenly. "I know I put it backwards. Gloria, I'm in love with you. I've always been in love with you and I want to marry you. Will you marry me?"

She raised her head then and let him see the stars in her eyes.

His arms opened and she went into them as easily and naturally as if she had been born only for this. Mart held her very close, asked Reginald:

"Want to be best man at the wedding?"

Reginald White grinned half-heartedly. "It's a poor consolation prize. But I guess if Gloria marries you, there'll be plenty of broken hearts around town."

Reg turned. "You two like to borrow the buggy for tonight?"

It seemed the easiest method of getting away from Reginald. Mart and Gloria went off in the fringed-top surrey behind the high-stepping bays. But they didn't drive long. As soon as Mart found a quiet spot, he stopped the horses and took Gloria in his arms.

His lips claimed hers, and she knew that they were sealing a promise that he was hers for as long as they both should live, and that never again would he be looking at another girl.

Gloria sighed happily. "Darling . . ."

Mart bent and kissed her. "Yes, honey?"

And because they were very much in love, and there were stars gleaming in their hearts and their eyes, they laughed. Now that they were safe in each other's arms and the dizzy ride on the merry-go-round was over, everything they said or did was gloriously funny.

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CAPTIVATIN' FUGITIVE

Sullie's heart was hostage to the past—
when she heard a mysterious stranger's serenade.

SULLIE finished setting the tea table, lit the candles and went to the window to draw the curtains. But, even as her hands lifted, she paused, conscious of looking out upon an empty world.

Althought it was still light, a full hour before dusk, the sky seemed metalically dark and the sun-dried earth, which had once been a garden, was bleakly gray. As if even nature were waiting, helplessly, for the moment when the spearhead of the Union Army would break through from the blockaded gulf.

Her hand slipped into a pocket hidden in the shirred fullness of her skirt and her fingers closed over a folded letter. The letter, which had arrived that morning, was from her brother who was somewhere in the north with the retreating Southern forces.

. . . the Federals outnumbered us five to one when they attacked Fort Henry. I saw Lyn in the midst of the fighting, but the going got too rough to notice anything. Afterwards, I couldn't find him. Finally, he was listed as "missing in action." Sullie, I wish I didn't have to write this.

Love,
Pete

"Lyn is dead. He's trying to tell me that." She spoke the words aloud and her lips were stones scraping together. Nothing within her accepted or rejected the statement for, where there had once been thought and emotion, there was now only dry emptiness. Tearless, futile emptiness.

She pulled the curtains together, turned to the side door and stepped out into the blighted garden. Where the path curved, a spray of wild redbuds curled up against an unpainted bench. She sat down to stare at them. They were going on with their struggle to live, as if living were really important.

A breeze, so slight as to barely stir withered leaves, held a disturbing scent, poignant as magnolia. It *was* magnolia. The single, neglected tree near the back hedge was blooming—perhaps to remind her of the nights when its heavy perfume had filled the world. A world which had belonged to her and Lyn Irving.

She leaned her dark head against the back of the bench and let her lashes veil even darker eyes. The light faded and dusk sharpened the scent of magnolias. She was conscious of movement somewhere in the garden and finally sensed it near her, but remained motionless, her eyes closed, for long minutes. When she opened them the man was there, sitting beside her, waiting for her to awaken.

Feeling neither fear nor surprise, she looked at him as she had at the darkened sky. He was bare headed and young, with bright brown hair which caught the stray flickers of light. His face was angular, actually too thin, and there were smudges of shadow under his cheekbones.

"I'm almost afraid to speak," he said. "I stumbled into a forgotten garden and found you asleep. I hope you won't disappear now that you're awake."

"No." She shook her head. "I'm real and there's nothing enchanted about the place."

By Anita Allen

"Love can bring you back to life. . . ."

"Except you. But you're the one who *does* the enchanting. Would you like to talk a little? It might help." He smiled, friendly, charming.

"There's nothing to talk about. Not any more. And why should I need to be helped?"

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"It doesn't matter." She stood up, glanced at the sky and back at him. "Good-by. You're apparently a stranger here. If you're looking for the town of Doucette, it's three miles south."

"Wait, please. Maybe there are things that matter." His height made him bend his head to look down at her. "There have to be for anyone so lovely."

"Then—what are those things?" Her curving mouth was deep, glowing pink in the gloom.

"Living. To be alive and needed, loved. . . ."

His voice was oddly like Lyn's. Low, rich and young. Except that Lyn's had held more laughter. Just as the poise of his head had been more recklessly challenging.

"To be alive and loved." She repeated his words aloud, listening to the sound of them, trying to capture their hidden, urgent meaning.

"Yes." He had moved closer. "Love can bring you back to life, too. I think you need to be brought back." He put his hand under her chin and tilted her face. And his head bent lower.

She closed her eyes and accepted his kiss. Shut out her thoughts and snatched at it, held on to it, as if Lyn had actually come back to her. His arms went around her and she relaxed against him, letting herself know a second of blind, exquisite warmth. Then it was ended and she straightened, murmured:

"Thank you. And now I have to go in. Good night."

She went back to the house, entered the living room and closed the door behind her. There was no reason for her cheeks to be blazingly hot. It had been a short, unreal moment and now it was done. She would not even remember it. But as she returned to the tea table, the flame was still in her cheeks and her pulses were too swift, too ragged. She had been awakened to a new consciousness.

TAKING her customary place at the table, she moved the candles closer together so that the light flared up, burnishing her night-black curls and putting a shadowy sheen on her eyelids. Her white skin had the warm, cared-for look of the southland, and her mouth was the clear pink of hibiscus. A mouth which was puzzling because it was not scarlet and because of the full, offering curve of the lower lip.

The door to the entrance hall opened. Sullie smiled without glancing up. "You're late, Dad."

"Sorry." Alex MacDowell paused on the threshold to return her smile and straighten his shoulders. "I've brought a guest—a newspaper man from Atlanta. We met in Doucette this afternoon. Come in, come in, sir. Sullie, this is Mr. John Lander—my daughter Sue Ellen MacDowell."

The thin, angular face. The brown hair, the low rich voice. It was the man who had been in the garden, who had held her in his arms to teach her the importance of love!

The pattern of her smile changed but her glance moved slowly over him, inspecting him.

Lander moved, without hurry, to the tea table. She gave him her hand. "The name John sounds Yankee, ma'am. I'm usually called Jake."

"I like that better, too. Would you sit here beside me?"

His eyes were blue, set under strongly shaped brows. The corners were crinkled from laughter. But their depths were a strange still black which held neither light nor the hint of fire. Yet, there was sensitiveness on his mouth and in his moulding of his wide forehead.

"I certainly didn't expect or hope for anything like this—like you—in a district drained by war and isolated by a blockade," he said.

Thin color streaked the white warmth of Sullie's face and she busied herself with the teapot, poured hot water, rearranged the cups. Awareness of what he was seeing ached through her. She was part of an exquisite picture salvaged from a devastated world which Jake Landor did not know was merely a dimming memory. He was

here in a lovely, gracious room where silver gleamed against heavy, handsome linen, watching a beautiful girl whose blue silk dress was collared in almost priceless lace.

But the candlelight was kind to both Sullie and the room. Its glow was too soft to reveal the mended places in her dress or the worn spots in the rugs. And the pleasant, restful tea hour glossed over the fact that this sparse afternoon meal would also be the MacDowell dinner.

His low voice dropped to a murmur as he went on speaking. ". . . . a home like this, a moment like this and a girl like you. No wonder every southerner fights like ten ordinary men."

Her glance flicked over him again and faint lines cut into the flesh between her narrow brows. He was well dressed, luxuriously dressed. She hadn't seen such clothes for years. "You said southerner as if you were just an observer, as if you had no interest in what's happening."

He grinned and his face turned young. "A newspaper man gets into the habit of speaking that way. Besides that's why the *Atlanta Gazette* sent me down here. I'm to watch and report the effect of the blockade."

"It must be strange to be merely an observer at such a time." Why didn't the depths of his eyes change? Perhaps because he wouldn't let them; because he was afraid of what they might reveal.

"Sullie." Her father's voice was reproving. "I'd like more tea, please."

Jake Landor talked aside the interruption. "It's all I'm fit for now, ma'am. I spent a year and a half in the army—picked up some bullet holes and ended up in a military prison camp. When the holes mended, I got away—but the army didn't want me any longer."

The color in the girl's face sharpened. Before she could speak, he added: "I'll be able to send back at least one despatch that'll make people sit up. I'll say that in spite of war, disaster and blockades, the South still lives confidently on rich plantations following it's accustomed way of life and—"

Sully put down her cup and pushed back her chair. "This isn't a plantation. Here in Texas, we call it a ranch—even if Louisiana is only a few miles away. And if you send such stuff you'll be lying!" The crimson was no longer merely a tinge over the lighter color of her lips. Her mouth had become burgundy flame. A dark, dusky brilliance which was a part of a night torn with vivid storm. As she finished speaking, she turned and started from the room.

"Sullie, my dear!" Alex MacDowell's voice was both startled and angry.

But the girl's step quickened and she hurried across the hall to the stairs. Alberta, a middle-aged maid who since the war had taken on the duties of cook and housekeeper, followed her.

"I'll tell your father you've got a headache," she said. "He won't like the way you acted."

"No thanks, Alberta. I'll talk to him later. It's just that—"

A brief knock cut through her words and Alex MacDowell entered the bedroom. "You're to apologize to our guest at once," he told her, his voice tight with anger. "Right now."

"I don't think—" But she broke off and said: "Yes, Dad. I *was* rude."

"Maybe not," Alberta put in. "I've been looking Mr. Landor over and there's something about him I don't like. What's the hurry about apologizing?"

MacDowell glared at her and stalked out. Sullie followed him downstairs. But Jake Landor was not in the living room. She remembered the garden. He would be there, of course. Perhaps he was even waiting for her.

AS SHE opened the side door, gauzy moonlight was veiling the garden, touching it with a hint of lost beauty. The perfume of the dying magnolia tree reached for her senses. She went directly to the bench sprayed by wild redbuds. Landor got silently to his feet.

"I've come to say that—"

"What your father demanded," he broke in. "But don't. The apologies should be from me. I talked like a blind idiot because everything I said was really about *you* and your loveliness. I couldn't even see the grim actuality."

"No." She tilted her head to look up at him and noticed the young lines of his mouth, the smudges of shadow under

his thin cheekbones. "You're my guest."

"Sullie, do you *want* me as a guest? Your father asked me to stay on the ranch until my job was finished, but it might be easier for you if I didn't.

"You're not to think of leaving! Even if I've been mannerless toward you I'll be hurt if you leave." The words came warmly and eagerly from lips trained to a code of unfailing courtesy.

"Are you sure?" he demanded, bending his tall head. "You'll be happier if I stay?"

"Of course!"

But his head was very close to hers now and his mouth directly above her own. The echo of his voice was caught in the perfumed air . . . a voice which was strangely like that of Lyn Irving. She went very still and waited for his kiss. It was slow and gentle, his arms taking her almost hesitantly.

The gauzy moonlight dimmed as if the night were rushing back over it, trying to hide it. The depths of his eyes held the same secretiveness, the blackness of a great, quiet lake. The darkening night was thrusting her toward the lake and its blackness was lifting up around her pulling her down into its ominously unstirring waters. . . .

The moon was gone but the claiming water had taken on the scent of magnolias. The taste of the blossoms was on his mouth, becoming heavy with warmth. And the warmth was growing swiftly as an igniting blaze. Her pulses were ragged drum beats pounding at her.

"Sullie, darling." The words were spoken against her cheek, spoken in Lyn Irving's low, richly vital voice.

She freed herself and discovered that the moon was still bright, the garden a waste even in the gauzy light. She turned away from him without speaking, went back into the house and started to cross the living room. But Alberta stopped her. The maid was standing near the doorway looking at her with new, startling disapproval in her eyes.

"I'd like to talk to you a minute, Miss Sullie. But not here. Can we go upstairs?"

"Of course." The girl's face warmed as she walked past the other woman to the stairs. Alberta had seen her in Jake Lander's arms—and Alberta had known Lyn Irving all his life.

As soon as the bedroom door closed behind them, the maid said: "I've got some surprising news for you. Mr. Lyn is here."

Sullie's lashes spread away from her dark eyes but she did not understand at once. "Mr. Lyn? Do you mean— Alberta!" She broke off and caught the woman's arm. "Where is he? When did he come—"

"Wait, child. I didn't mean that he's in this house. He came here, slipped through the back door just after dark. He escaped from a Northern prison camp. His wound is still bothering him. I wouldn't let him stay here because I wasn't easy about it, so I took him to my mother's cabin. I told him you'd be there as soon as you could."

"Why your mother's cabin? If he's wounded, we'll take care of him here."

"Hush!" Alberta commanded. "This country's full of Federals who're not in uniform. Full of Union spies, too—and he's an escaped prisoner. No one's to know where Mr. Lyn is. Not even your father."

"All right, all right. Let's get to the cabin, quickly."

"First put on a dark cloak," the maid said. Going to the closet she took down a black cape. "We'll go through the kitchen and across to the wagon road. We're going to walk, just as if we're visiting a nearby neighbor, so change your shoes."

In the kitchen Alberta, also wearing a long coat, picked up a covered basket and, gesturing the girl to silence, led the way to the wagon road. Half a mile south, at Spinnet Creek they turned onto the open range and walked along the banks of the little stream to a group of cabins. And finally, they were entering one of the cabins and Lyn was pulling himself up from a cot.

His arms opened and she went into them. Neither spoke for long, grateful, unbelievable moments. Even as her mouth lifted for his kiss, there were tears in her throat and she ended the kiss, pressing her face into his shoulder to hide them.

He chuckled, then, and held her away from him. "You *would* cry as soon as there was no longer any reason for it," he said. "Sullie, stop. It interferes with more important things." He caught her close again. As the magic of the past returned, the force of living drove through her, glowed from her. Her mouth was deepest,

duskiest crimson under his. Her pulses lifted into a great, steady pounding to match the surge of his blood and her heart took on the same rhythm. There was only Lyn. Only his arms and his lips. She herself had, for this moment, ceased to exist except through him. And oblivion was exquisite.

A door opened and closed, in noisy warning. "Well, Mr. Lyn," Alberta said, as if completely unaware of their reluctantly ending caress. "I brought some things that'll help feed you up. Not what I'd like to have for you, but it's hard to get just what a person wants these days. There's jelly and pone. A little chicken, too."

As the maid began to open the basket, pain and anger knifed through Sullie. She hadn't realized, until now, how very ill Lyn looked. His tall body was shockingly thin, his cheeks hollow under sharpened cheek bones and his face was gray with pallor.

His lieutenant's uniform was ragged, dirty and crudely patched. Watching him sit down with almost fierce eagerness to the food Alberta was placing before him, the girl wanted to strike at the world with her clenched fists. They had done this to Lyn, her Lyn.

But the laughter was still in his eyes and the reckless challenge in the poise of his head. He looked up at her with his quick grin. "War makes a person forget all about manners, darling. Please help me eat this wonderful chicken. Never tasted anything like it."

"No, no. I had dinner just before I came." But she sat beside him watching him, her hungry eyes feasting on the sight of him.

When Lyn finished eating, Alberta said: "We'll leave now, Miss Sullie. Someone might wonder where we are or why you're spending so much time in this cabin."

"No, not yet!"

"Yes, ma'am. Right now."

Lyn's arms went around the girl. "Alberta's right, darling. Maybe you can come back tomorrow night and we'll talk. I've some things to tell you."

"But you'll be alone here, except for Alberta's mother and she's too old to help you. You need care."

"I'll stay," the maid said. "You'll be safe going home alone. If your father asks about me, say my mother's sick but that I'll be back tomorrow for at least part of the day."

There was a final kiss, another brief moment of tender oblivion before the cabin door closed behind her. She started along the creek bank, walking with swift, easy strides, conscious of being completely, excitingly alive. Love did bring one back, did make existence important. Now that Lyn had returned to her. . . .

SOMEONE was coming along the path, toward her. "Sullie! How'd you get here?" It was Jake Landor. His face was too angular in the moonlight and his eyes seemed probing. Had he followed her from the house? If he were to become curious about her visit to the cabin. . . .

"I came with Alberta. Her mother's ill and I thought there was something I might be able to do. But I'd never suspect a stranger to stroll along the creek! Few people ever even notice the path."

"I saw it at once. I felt like walking and started down the wagon road. The little path looked interesting—but, hold on! Let me look at you."

He bent and stared into her face. "Sullie, Sullie . . . I wouldn't have believed you could become any lovelier, but you have! You've turned into a goddess. And your mouth is a flame. A flame showing against the sky on a dark night."

She smiled and tilted her chin. "Perhaps I belong to the night. That's the only time some plants bloom," she murmured, letting laughter thread through her voice.

"Yes, you do! You know the Confederate Rose is pink, pale as hibiscus during the day and turns to deep crimson at night." His hands lifted to touch her but she stepped back, away from him.

"I'll have to hurry," she said quickly. "I didn't tell dad I was leaving and he may be worried. Good night. See you in the morning."

"But I'm taking you home. You shouldn't be out alone at night. You're too beautiful to ever be safe."

She started on. "If you're coming, you'll have to walk fast."

He caught up with her but she moved at her fastest pace, and they did not speak again until they reached the house, when he said: "Let your father know you're back and then come out into the garden for awhile. I'd like to talk—there's something I want to say."

"Not tonight. It's too late."

"Just for a few minutes. Sullie, darling—" His arms brought her tightly against him and his mouth sought to take hers. But she went still and rigid.

"No," she said quietly.

He freed her at once and before he could speak, she turned into the house. . . .

She awoke the next morning to find Alberta standing beside her bed. "What is it? Why didn't you stay with Lyn?"

"We'd better be quiet," the maid said. "Get dressed and come downstairs. Act as if you're surprised—and you will be, too. But be careful."

"Alberta—"

But the woman was already closing the door behind her. Sullie pulled on her clothes, fastened a green cambric morning dress with fumbling hands, brushed her hair and hurried out to the stairs.

There were voices coming from the living room—excited masculine voices. Her father and Jake Landor. And a third man who spoke in deep rich tones. Lyn!

She stumbled as she reached the open doorway, caught herself and stared into the room. Yes. It was Lyn Irving, looking even thinner, paler and more ragged.

"Figured I'd better hide out for a look around," he was telling her father, "and when I went outside this morning, Landor stopped me. He explained that he was your guest and insisted on bringing me here—for awhile he even seemed ready to use force!"

"Lyn," Sullie murmured.

He turned, caught her glance and held it, warningly, before he sprang toward her. "Yes, it's really me," he said. "Glad?"

His gray eyes were still signalling and her lips shaped into a smile of understanding.

"We heard that you were missing. It was dreadful—but let me look at you, Lyn!"

"I knew you'd want me to bring him here." Jake Landor was standing at her side. "I was taking a walk along the creek when I saw him—realized he was a Confederate officer who'd probably escaped from prison. So I introduced myself. He needs care, and this is the place for him to get it."

"It certainly is," the girl said, her voice taking on new crispness. "Imagine your finding one of our dearest friends and helping him, even though you'd no idea who he was. But now, we're going to see that Lyn rests. Alberta?"

"Yes, ma'am." The maid stepped out from the doorway.

"Get fresh linen, everything you'll need for the second guest room. And hurry. Come on, Lyn."

He followed her up the stairs to the guest room, and they chatted casually while Alberta arranged sheets and bedding. "I'll find something to do outside," she said finally, "in case you'd like a little while together without interruptions."

As soon as they were alone Sullie went into his arms because she could do nothing else. Close to him, the renewed drive toward life rushed through her. The first sweetness of oblivion was touching her senses when he released her, almost abruptly.

"Darling, listen to me. There's something about Jake Landor I don't like and don't trust. Besides, I've got to get back through the lines and do it fast. The last day I was in the prison camp I picked up some information that might win or lose the war for us.

"I'm going to leave tonight. But Landor's not to know about it. We'll have to throw him off, somehow. I've got a hunch he came down to look for me. When I met him I wasn't armed and I'm sure if I'd refused to return here with him, he'd have pulled a gun. I've seen him before, although I can't recall where."

"Lyn, you can't leave tonight! You can't go back to that!"

His gray eyes quieted with surprise. But then he laughed and caught her to him. "You just mean that we both wish I didn't have to."

"Yes," she said, and as she spoke her lips were stones scraping together. "Of course you must go. Don't leave your room today. Alberta will bring what you want and I'll explain that you've collapsed

with exhaustion. Tonight—" She paused and her stone-dry lips twisted as she thought of the garden. "I'll see that Landor's too busy to think of your whereabouts."

He kissed her briefly, poignantly. But she could not forget that she might never again see him.

When she started from the room, Lyn's arms closed on her slim shoulders. "This had better be good-by. If you're with me too much, he may guess the truth about us. That'll make him suspicious enough to be on guard even with you."

The dry emptiness was touching her senses again as she went downstairs. Her father explained that Jake had gone into town to send a dispatch to his newspaper, and would not return until late.

UT at three that afternoon Jake Landor walked, almost noiselessly, into the living room, where Sullie was struggling with the hopeless tasking of mending already over-mended clothing. Her first surprise turned into fear.

"I didn't expect you! Dad said you'd be very late!"

"Did I make a mistake by coming back early?" He grinned as he spoke but his blue eyes were watchful and their depths darker, stranger than ever.

"Of course not. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes. And I've arranged a surprise for you. You'll see it tonight."

"Why not now? I don't like waiting."

"You'll have to, this time. Sullie, you looked like a child, then. Or maybe not—because your mouth is the color of wine again. I thought it got like that only at night—at the dark peak of night."

He came toward her, stood directly before her. "You've changed since yesterday. You seem to be turning away from me."

Her deeply red lips curved and her face tilted as she smiled. "I wasn't running away yesterday? Is that what you mean?"

"No." He took the mending basket from her lap, put it on a table and reached for her hands. Drawing her up to her feet, he held her close to him but made no attempt to take her into his arms. "I guess you know I love you, Sullie. It's more than love. You've become all of life and the world to me. Last night you were the last thought I had and this morning when I woke up, you were still in my mind."

"But we've only known each other a little while, a single day. We're different kinds of people from different worlds."

"Do you really think that?"

She met the searching blue eyes and looked steadily into their black, unreadable depths. "Yes," she said. "The—what happened in the garden wasn't *real*. We both knew we were pretending, trying to make dreams come to life."

"I wasn't. I love you. It's a terrible kind of love, too. One that would do anything to keep you—and I will keep you." His voice dropped to thickness and he bent to take her lips.

She turned her head sharply. "I'm sorry, Jake."

"You're not sorry. Lyn Irving means too much for you to think of anyone else. I saw that at once. It was after he showed up that you changed. But I won't let you change!"

His arms went around her roughly, demandingly, and he held her against him so that she was helpless. Yet, with his mouth almost on hers, he straightened and released her. "I was wrong. I don't want to kiss you that way."

"I know, Jake."

He heeled sharply about and started for the door, where he paused to look back at her. "Will you come to the garden tonight for your surprise? I'll be waiting for you."

"Yes," she said. "I'll be there." Lyn had to get out of the house tonight without being seen and she had promised to keep Jake Landor busy. It would be easy this way... for her and for Lyn. Her throat tightened and her mouth filled with the sharp salt of angry self-dislike.

But at eight o'clock she went out to the garden. She had hesitated for a long time, had had to force herself not to go upstairs for a last, brief glimpse of Lyn.

Instead, she walked down the moon-misted, crooked path to the bench where Jake Landor waited. He grinned at her, his tall head bent, and stepped abruptly away from the bench. Behind him was a great, tissue-wrapped bouquet of roses—

of deeply crimson, rare Confederate roses.

"Where did you get them? How could you have found them?" she demanded.

"In town. I went practically from door to door, asking if anyone knew where Confederate roses might be growing. Finally a youngster produced them after he'd been absent at least an hour—probably picking them."

"They're beautiful. Too beautiful, because they hurt a little."

"So do you," Jake murmured. "Looking at you hurts—but it's a hurt I wouldn't give up or lose. Sullie, you know it had to be like this for us."

His arms claimed her, crushing the roses against her throat, crushing her slim body against his. His mouth was rushing storm... a hot mid-summer storm which whipped her senses into faintness.

"No. Jake, no—" But the words caught in her throat and her lips would not shape them.

"You're right, Sullie." The new low voice was metal harsh. "It's no. Get your hands up, Landor—Richards."

Jake straightened slowly, stared at the short-gun in Lyn Irving's hand and grinned crookedly.

"Put your hands up," Irving repeated.

Landor lifted them. Lyn took a revolver from Jake's pocket, dropped it into one of his own. "Now, I'm going to lock you up until I can get some Confederate soldiers to take you to the nearest prison camp."

"Lyn." The girl caught at his arm. "What are you talking about? You said you intended to—"

"I changed my plans," he snapped. "This afternoon I remembered who he was. I'd only seen pictures of him, but there's no mistake. He's one of the cleverest spies in the Union army."

"Spy? A Union spy?"

Lyn nodded grimly. "Oh, he's a newspaper man, too. A pretty famous one. But when the war started, he joined the Union army and used his newspaper experience to act as a spy. You've heard of John Richards, a New York newspaper writer. The Richards who crossed the continent and spent months in the wilderness, who escaped three times from Confederate military prisons."

Sullie's lips broke apart and her eyes were very black as she stared into Jake's face. "Yes. I've heard of him. John Richards, of course."

Richards dropped his arms. "All right, get on with it. Sorry, Sullie," he said, turning to the girl. "I intended to tell you —some time. I love you and I meant everything I said. But, even if I have been acting as spy, I'm an officer in the United States army. I didn't—dishonor you."

Lyn gestured with the short-gun and walked behind Richards into the house. But the girl remained where she was, her hands clenched on the crushed, bruised roses.

There was nothing to be done now. She couldn't be sure Lyn would ever understand. When he came, she'd explain, and hope....

But when he returned, walking swiftly and impatiently, there was no chance to explain. His arms claimed her and his mouth touched her with fire.

When the kiss finally ended, she heard him saying: "I'll have Richards sent to military prison. He'll be safe there until the end of the war. And then I'll come back for you. I've got to come back or you might get mixed up again—out of loneliness."

"Then you knew. You understood that—"

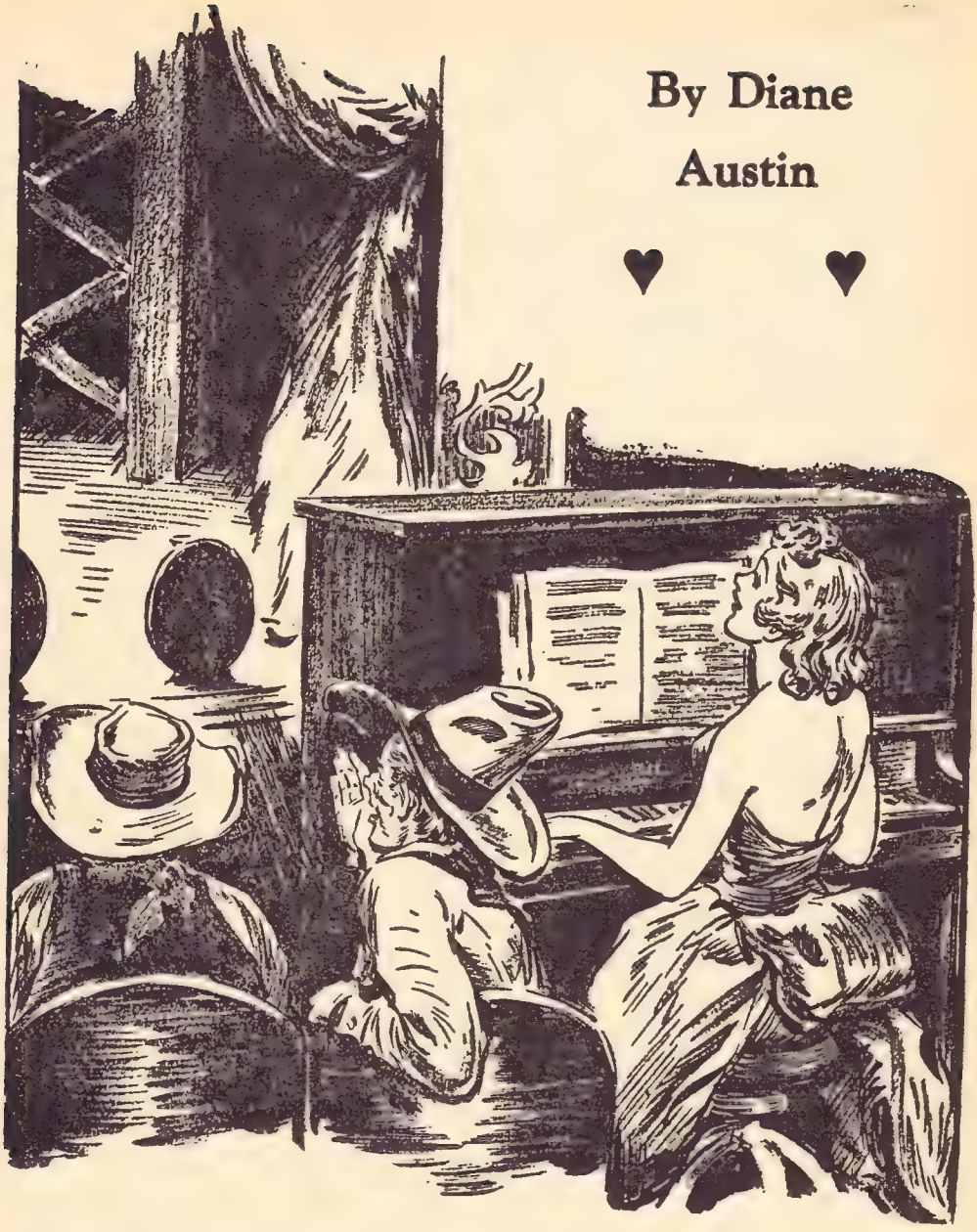
"Too well," he broke in. "We won't talk about it again." And his lips made it impossible—and unnecessary—for Sullie to speak.

The winning last line of the November PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

Our firebrand is in need of a flame,
Whether rolling her own . . . or her eyes.
Though two on a match is this lovely's game—
Watch out for those little white lies.

was won by Mrs. Francis Millett, Box 1223, Alturas, California

By Diane Austin



The cowboys yelled derisively: "Bring on the dancing girls!"

A ROMEO

town, when she caught sight of the stranger hammering away at the side of the opera house.

The morning was almost gone, and Kitty had promised Skip she'd be there with the keg of nails by noon. But still, she had a sudden hankering to find out what the poster was all about. And the fact that, from the back anyways, the stranger appeared to be mighty handsome and have an unmistakably rakish air to him, added heaps more to her curiosity.

She pulled the two chestnuts to a halt and climbed down from the wagon. Then, hands tucked in her jeans' pockets, the features of her pretty face arranged as innocently as possible, Kitty sauntered over.

"Mornin', stranger," she said brightly to the back of his dark head.

"Mnng," he returned.

Kitty stared at him. "Huh?" she said, somewhat inelegantly.

He turned around. "Luk, lai—" he began. And when he got a good view of Kitty. His eyes bugged and his jaw went slack, and his mouth opened gapingly wide—so wide that half-a-dozen nails spilled out.

"Where'd you crop up from, beautiful?" he said finally.

She shook her head, teasing him with her smile. "Whatcha doing?"

For answer, he pointed with his hammer to the poster, one side of which was already nailed to the opera house.

"What's it say?" Kitty persisted.

"You'll see," said the good-looking stranger. He had a pencil-line of a black mustache, and it bristled fascinatingly when he spoke. "Pronto!"

With that, he picked up the nails from the ground and resumed his banging. In another few minutes, the poster was firmly secured. They both stood back to survey the scene.

Now it was Kitty's turn to give way to plumb astonishment. Her blue eyes bugged, too, and her cherry-wine lips parted with disbelief. For the words on the sign were just too good to be true. Slowly, she read them over again:

Dave Stone's Dramatic Company
Presents
Scenes from "Romeo And Juliet"
by Wm. Shakespeare
Starring
Maxine Shannon and Andy Nashe
For One Full Week Starting Next Sunday Evening
Performance at the Pony River Opera House. Curtain Goes Up 8:00 P.M.
Note: There will be a tryout for several minor parts. Local talent are invited to show up at the Opera House at ten o'clock of the morning the Company arrives in town.
Dave Stone
Mgr.

"You like high-falutin' plays like that, beautiful?" the man was saying.

Kitty glowed with new radiance as she turned to him.

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "I—I've sort of dreamed of being an actress some day!"

"You don't say. . . ." His eyes went ambling over her, from the crown of her taffy-blonde hair to the tips of her scuffed leather boots.

"Mmmm," she said happily, and read the poster again, for the third time.

She felt a finger poke her in the ribs. She jumped.

"Look," said the stranger thoughtfully. "If you're so het up on this actin' business, why don't you show up at that there tryout tomorrow mornin', like it says? Rest of the troupe'll be in town then."

"You reckon I could?" Kitty gushed.

He waved a hand. "Why sure, honey. You just—"

She cut him off. "Oh, I'll be there, mister. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Gosh, wait—till Skip hears." Excitedly, she ran back to the wagon.

"Hey!" he called after her.

"G'by, mister. Thanks a lot!" She clambered up to the seat, picked up the reins.

"Dave Stone!" the stranger shouted.

"I know," she yelled back. "The manager. I'll be sure and ask for him!"

He shouted some more. "Me! I'm Dave Stone!"

"Oh gosh," said Kitty breathlessly.

But just then the chestnuts took it into their heads to be off at a gallop. The wagon leaped ahead, and the rest of Kitty's words trailed off into the wind and the dust.

In her haste to carry the news back to Skip, she almost forgot about the keg of nails. But she made the purchase swiftly,

and then sent the wagon hurtling out of town in the direction of the mountains.

IT WAS in a saucer of green, picturesque land, rimmed by the foot of the mountains that Kitty and Skip were building their future home. They would be married just as soon as the cabin was finished, and from the way things were going, she reflected happily, that date wasn't very far off.

After a wait of six weeks, he had finally been able to pick up the special shipment of lumber from Kansas City. The scarcity of lumber in the cactus country had delayed their marriage for almost a year now because Skip Hewitt, being—in Kitty's private opinion—a mule-headed if lovable young man, wanted to give his bride a new home as a wedding present.

She was smiling broadly as he hauled back on the reins, slowing the horses to a gradual stop.

"Skip!" she yelled. "Skip, I'm back."

She heard the solid smack of a long board as it dropped behind the large pile of neatly stacked wood. The rugged-looking redhead dressed in ranch work clothes was scowling as he came out toward the wagon.

"It's about time," he said, squinting up at the sun directly overhead. "What kept you? You should have been back an hour ago." He walked to the back of the wagon and let down the small gate.

She waited until he had lifted down the heavy keg of nails, and then she could wait no longer.

"I'm sorry, Skip," she said. "But—I've got such wonderful news for you!"

"Out with it," he grunted, as he carried the keg over to the building clearing.

"Well," she said, jumping lightly off the step on the wagon, "it's like this. There's a theatrical company coming to town tomorrow and starting next Sunday they're going to do scenes from *'Romeo and Juliet'* and it's gonna be at the opera house and—"

Skip set the keg down. "Hold on, gal, before you blow a stirrup. If it's that all-fired important to you, I'll get some tickets."

"You won't have to, Skip," Kitty said impishly.

"You mean you *don't* want to go? Swell!"

"I don't mean that at all," she said, pouting. "I mean that I'll probably be able to get you in for nothing, seeing as how I'm gonna be acting in the show."

For a moment he gaped at her, and then he exploded. "Gonna be in it—*you?*" He gave a short laugh. "For a spell there I thought you were serious." He picked up a hatchet and pounded in the top of the keg.

Kitty stamped a booted foot into the dust. "Skip Hewitt," she cried. "Are you gonna listen to me?"

There was the screeching sound of splintering wood.

"Sure, honey," he said. "I'm listenin'. Only give me a hand here, willya? We've got a big week ahead of us."

Her smile came, sugary sweet. "*You've* got the rest of the week," she told him. "*I'm* gonna be rehearsing!"

"What in blazes—chew that a little finer, willya?"

"I've been trying to tell you, Skip," she said eagerly. "This here dramatic company is blowing into town, and they're holding tryouts for parts tomorrow, and the manager himself as good as promised me one."

Skip straightened. "Haven't you got that fool actin' notion out of your head yet? Just 'cause you had three lines to say in the Christmas play last year, you think you've got the makin's of an actress."

"I had *four* lines, I'll have you know," she denied haughtily.

"I—" said Skip—"am not countin' the one you bungled. Now, give me a kiss and then hand me that hammer over there."

She pouted some more, but she did as she was told. Skip's kisses were never the world-shaking kind, but they always managed to rock Pony River a good bit around her. Kitty felt warm and tingling and loved, all at the same time, there in Skip's arms.

"Now," said he. "The hammer."

"Never heard of it," murmured Kitty, and kissed him again.

After that, Skip went back to work, whistling cheerfully. Kitty helped, obeying his orders but with lackadaisical movements. Her fingers sorted nails and lifted

boards and cleared away debris, but her thoughts were trodding the boards of the Pony River Opera House.

Tomorrow morning, she dreamed ahead, she'd show up for the tryouts. Thanks to Dave Stone she'd be sure to get a part, even if it was a minor one like the poster said. But it would be enough to set the whole town back on its heels, especially Skip—who had done nothing but scoff at her since she had appeared in the Christmas play. Still, she did feel a slight pang of guilt for not being able to help with their home-building while she was busy being dramatic.

But then, she reassured herself, once she had gotten the acting bug out of her head, and Skip was convinced of her great talents—then they'd go ahead twice as fast on the house. She could just hear the excited murmurs among the guests at their wedding. . . .

That's Kitty Lacey, the famous actress. . . . Yup. Played in Will Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" . . . . A downright shame she's swappin' her career for a ranch wife's role. . . .

She could even imagine she heard their applause as she came down the aisle—

"Kitty! I said I needed some nails!"

It was only Skip. And the applause was the sound of his angry hammering on a piece of lumber for her attention. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Rushed Off Her Feet

THE next morning, Kitty saddled her roan, Lady Lightnin', and rode into town. Her heart gave an unexpected lurch as she passed the familiar turnoff to the draw, where Skip must already be hard at work, but she kept resolutely on her way.

There were a good handful of townfolk inside the old opera house, evidently there for the tryouts. They exchanged half-sheepish greetings with Kitty, then returned to their posturings and mumblings of lines.

Suddenly, she felt a tug on her shirt sleeve. She swung around.

"Hello again," said Dave Stone.

Kitty beamed at him.

"You know," he went on, running a finger along his mustache, "you never did let on what your name was."

"Kitty Lacey," she said breathlessly.

"A lovely name," he whispered, "for an even lovelier girl. Did I tell you that you're like a gorgeous desert flower blooming in the sage?"

The color rose in her cheeks. "Mr. Stone—"

"Dave," he said.

"How touching," a third voice put in. "Dave, for the manager of the troupe, you're the greatest actor of us all!"

Kitty looked up, startled. A languorous-looking, dark-haired girl was regarding them through half-shuttered lids. Behind her was a pale, scrawny gentleman.

"Come on, Dave," prompted the girl. "Who's the village belle?"

"Uh, Kitty," he stammered. "This is Maxine Shannon, our leadin' lady, and Andy Nashe, our leadin' man. Maxine, Andy—this is Miss Lacey."

Kitty's eyes shone with admiration. "How do you do," she said, awed.

"Jer do," said Andy Nashe.

"Um," replied the actress. "You trying out for a part?"

"Oh yes!" Kitty nodded so vigorously that her taffy-blonde curls were flung out in all directions.

Maxine Shannon looked her up and down. And then her eyes narrowed again, as if with displeasure at what she saw.

"Let her play Rosaline," she said curtly, and walked away, Andy Nashe tagging at her heels.

"Gosh, thank you, Miss Shannon," Kitty called after her. To Dave, she said, excited, "Wasn't that wonderful of her? And she doesn't even know whether I'm any good or not!"

"Uh, Kitty . . . " For some reason, Dave was stammering again. "Rosaline is just a character the others talk about. She never even makes an appearance, much less has a line to say. Maxine was havin' her little jest."

Kitty saddened at his words. She understood the other girl's jest, all right. She understood, too, that the actress was gonna be a definite hair in her butter.

"Cheer up," said Dave, warmly. "We need someone to play Lady Capulet."

She perked up again. "Oh, could I? Just imagine me—Lady Capulet."

"You'll have to be made up old for it, you know," he warned. "Lady Capulet is Juliet's mother."

Kitty sighed. Still, it was a part.

"All right, folks," Dave called out. "Let's get started now. Who'd like to do the apothecary's part? It's open."

"Me, sir," meekly said Ed Twill—who happened to be Pony River's one and only apothecary.

Maxine Shannon shook her sleek, dark head. "Not him," she said loudly. "He doesn't look the part. How about that tall, handsome cowboy over there. . . ."

And so they went through the tryouts, with the leading lady making most of the decisions. Soon, all the available parts except Lady Capulet's, had been given out.

"Come up here, Kitty," directed Dave, and skittish as a spooked bronc, Kitty joined him on the stage. He handed her a piece of paper on which some lines were written.

"Read them," he inited. "Go ahead, beautiful. Don't be afraid. It's the scene where Lady Capulet finds her daughter dead."

Kitty could sense Maxine's baleful stare full on her. She drew a deep breath and began to read.

"Oh me oh my child my only life revive look up or I will die with thee help help call help."

She saw Maxine wince. But, of course, she *would*.

Dave said slowly, "Kitty, supposin' you try the next lines—but with a little more feelin', a little more expression."

ENCOURAGED, she read on: "Alack the day! She's dead, SHE'S DEAD! *SHE'S DEAD!*" The last note of her screaming faded away on the air. Not a sound was heard from the hushed audience. Kitty took heart. Her acting must have overwhelmed them to silence.

Maxine was the first to speak. "She's rotten," she stated flatly.

"Plumb terrible," someone chimed in.

"I don't mind looking good at another's expense," the dark-haired girl went on, "but I'm not *that* good!"

"Sure was plumb terrible," the other voice agreed again.

"She won't do," Maxine said, wearily. "Get someone else, Dave."

The manager came up to her. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Kitty," he said. "You heard her. But look—we could use someone to take care of the props and costumes, and —and play the piano."

Kitty was absolutely crushed. But under the smirking glance of the other girl, she kept a brave smile curving her lips.

"I can play," she said. "I—I'd like to take care of the costumes and things. . . ." *That's Kitty Lacey, the famous costumer and dramatic piano player . . . . Yup. Played all that music for Will Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". . . .* It was, thought Kitty, better than nothing.

And loudly and clearly, so that Maxine Shannon would be sure not to miss it, she added: "Would be kind of foolish, my playing *her* mother, anyways."

The brunette actress gasped. And that other voice spoke again.

"That was downright rude of you, Kitty—speakin' to the young lady like that. Oughta be plumb ashamed of yourself."

For the first time, Kitty became aware that the mysterious voice had a familiar drawl to it. It sounded suspiciously like Skip! She whirled and glanced down to the sprinkling of spectators. Sure enough. There was his flaming red head.

"I had an idea I might find you here," he said mildly. "'Specially when you didn't show up to lend a hand buildin' the house." He came up the steps leading to the stage and stood beside her.

"Oh, is Kitty a carpenter?" Maxine Shannon inquired dulcetly.

"She sure ain't no actress, ma'am," Skip replied fervently. At his words, a ripple of laughter ran light-footed around the stage.

Kitty could have died of the humiliation. She felt like hauling off and pulling Skip's red hair, then smearing Maxine's smile straightways off her smirking face. Dave's hand, creeping around her waist, saved her from further murderous inclinations.

"That's perfectly all right," he said cheerfully. "Kitty's gonna be a big help,

just the same." And Dave winked at her encouragingly.

Now it was Skip who looked as though he were in a destructive mood. He glared at the other man.

"Let's go, Kit," he said in menacing tones. "We've got work to do."

"What's your hurry, cowboy?" Maxine asked softly. Much too softly.

Dave, who had hastily backed away a few steps, nodded. "Kitty has work to do—here. She's got to start rehearsin' with us."

Skip didn't look at him. "You comin', Kit?"

She hesitated. She glanced at him, then at Dave. She thought of the exciting two week ahead of her, here with these people of the stage, working on costumes and props, taking tickets, being part of their life. She thought of *all* the weeks ahead of her, when there would be nothing else to do, but build a house and settle down on a shirttail outfit to marriage.

Kitty said, "No. I'm staying, Skip."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged, and his lips were a grim line of anger.

Then suddenly, before Maxine and Dave and Andy, before all the other actors and townfolk—he grabbed her up in his arms and kissed her. He kissed her as he had never done before, his mouth bruising hers with the impact, and the savagery of it took Kitty's breath away. She staggered and almost fell when he finally dropped his arms and let her go.

"Mmmmm," said Maxine meaningfully. "They sure grow 'em big and brutal out here in the West, don't they?"

Kitty was dazed. She just stood there and numbly listened to Skip's parting words.

"Any time you've ready to get married," he gritted, "just let me know. An' maybe, just maybe, we still will—*if* I'm not too busy." He left the stage and stalked out of the opera house.

"Well, well, well," murmured Maxine after his broad back. And then she added, "My!"

Dave clapped his hands. "Come on, everybody," he ordered. "Let's get goin', folks."

Unaccountably, the tears were welling up in Kitty's eyes. "Yes-s-s," she said on a half-sob. "Let's . . . "

EHEARSALS began. It was a week of excitement for Kitty, all right. Of excitement and grueling work. She mended the actors' tights and Juliet's gowns, saw to it that the tickets were run off at the printer's, helped change sets, prompted the players from the wings, and did the countless other odd jobs there were to be done before opening night.

Yet, no matter how hard she labored, no matter how deeply her mind was engrossed in details of the play, she found heart-breakingly too much time in which her thoughts could dwell on Skip.

He hadn't paid her an evening call for three nights now. It had been their romantic custom to go riding in the moonlight, and under its silvery mantle, rapturously plan out the years together ahead of them. But now, the moon went to waste on empty rangeland, and Kitty remained in her room, tired and lonely.

Once, when she was fitting Maxine for a gown she had just let out, the actress said silkily:

"I ran into your cowpoke the other night, Kitty. At the Golden Nugget Saloon. We had a mighty interestin' talk."

Deliberately, Kitty took a pin and placed it where it would do the most good.

"Ouch!" shrieked the dark-haired girl.

"Sorry," murmured Kitty smoothly. "Now what was it you were saying?"

Maxine glared down at her. Kitty now held a pair of scissors in one hand, a half-dozen more pins in the other.

"I'll tell you all about it," the actress said tightly, "when you're unarmed. . . ."

It was that afternoon that Dave discovered there was no lumber to be had in Pony River for building the balcony in the big love scene.

"Now what?" he groaned. "How can we do *'Romeo and Juliet'* without a balcony? And openin' night's only three days away!"

"Don't ask me," Maxine snapped. "I'm the leadin' lady, not a car—" Her dark eyes gleamed. "Oh, Kitty," she purred.

Kitty, who had been fearfully listening to this exchange of palaver, began to sidle away.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Maxine asked Dave.

The manager stroked his chin, fingered his mustache, then went back to stroking his chin. "We sure do need that lumber—"

Kitty turned and would have run, but his fingers were all at once clutching her elbows. He twirled her around to him.

"You've liked workin' with us, beautiful, haven't you?" he asked suavely.

She nodded.

"You'd sure like to hold on to this job, wouldn't you?"

Again, but more slowly, she nodded.

His hand was caressing her arm now. "Well, Kitty, it seems we need lumber badly," he pursued. "What are you gonna do about it?"

Kitty shuddered. "We—we can't *steal* it," she said at last. "Skip would have a fit!"

"It would only be a loan, beautiful," Dave assured her. "Just a loan. . . ."

And so that night, while a pale moon scudded behind mist-woven clouds, in the saucer of land rimmed by the foot of the mountains, two figures piled piece after piece of lumber into the rear of a sturdy wagon.

"Have we got enough yet?" Kitty asked tremulously.

The sight of the half-finished house—that was to be her home—filled her with a want for Skip. She felt an aching stab of remorse.

"Reckon so," Dave was saying. "This sure is good lumber."

"Look, Dave. Maybe . . . we'd better not, huh?" It was the weakest sort of protest.

He smiled at her. The moon peered out from the clouds for a moment, then scurried right back in. Dave kissed her.

It was all so sudden and shocking, that Kitty could think of nothing to do but respond to it. For it wasn't the suddenness that was so shocking, it was the practiced way he was kissing her.

"I told you it was only a loan," he said afterward.

"But—"

He kissed her again.

"And don't forget the nails," he said. . . .

By eleven o'clock the next morning, after a great deal of listless sawing and hammering and nailing, Kitty had put together something that resembled a balcony. And after a great deal more tugging and heaving and teetering on a ladder, with the help of two actors who played Lord Capulet and Lord Montague, she finally erected the structure.

"Ready now?" Dave asked. "Where's the drape to cover that thing? We'll have our first dress rehearsal."

Kitty, who had been about to hammer the railing into place, looked down at him, confused.

"I'll get it," she said. She came down from the ladder and went backstage for the dark cloth.

At last, everything was in readiness. Maxine, looking deceptively sweet in her Juliet makeup, climbed up to the balcony. Andy Nashe, as the love-smitten Romeo, stood below. Everyone else was hushed, waiting for the scene to unfold.

And Kitty—Kitty watched in mute enthrallment.

Romeo spoke: "He jests at scars, that never felt a wound."

Juliet appeared above, and Romeo went on in ardent tones: "But, soft! what

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light through yonder window breaks—"

Snap! Crunch! Bang!

"Watch out!" screamed Juliet.

CHAPTER THREE

Dress Rehearsal

UT it was too late. Romeo—or, rather Andy Nashe—lay writhing on the stage, clutching his shoulder where the wooden railing of the balcony had hit it. He was all but covered by the black drapery, which had fallen with the railing.

There was a silence, a thunderous silence. And then everyone seemed to be talking and running around at once.

"Ohhhh," moaned Andy Nashe.

"Someone get me down from this death trap!" screeched Maxine.

"Someone get a doctor!"

"Kitty!" Dave roared. "What happened to that balcony?"

"Ohhhh."

"I reckon," said Kitty feebly, "I forgot to nail the railing on." *Gosh, what a jackpot this was!*

"A ladder, a ladder," Maxine kept on shouting.

"Did someone go for a doctor?"

"Ohhhh . . ."

And then, in the midst of all the ruckus, a figure appeared in the opera-house doorway, a six-shooter cocked in either hand. The figure stalked down the aisle.

"All right, you ornery varmints!" he bellowed. "Reach!"

Andy Nashe opened one eye, closed it again swiftly. "Ohhhh, ohhhh."

"Who rustled my lumber?" Skip demanded in a dreadful voice.

"Don't look at me," said Maxine from the crippled balcony. "How about a lift down from here, cowboy?"

Skip waved a gun at her. "Stay where you are, ma'am. Everybody stay where they are."

"Ohhhh . . ."

"Shut up! I'm a-aimin' to get to the bottom of this."

"I wish," mourned Maxie, "someone would get me to the bottom of this."

"Who rustled my lumber?" demanded Skip again. The gun whipped around and pointed to Dave. "Did you, mister?"

A look of complete terror swept over the troupe manager's face. He pointed a wavering finger at Kitty.

The double-dyed coward! Kitty thought fast.

"It—it was only a loan, Skip," she faltered.

"All right now, where's our patient?" asked a cheery voice. Doc Huggins had just come on the scene. He took in the prostrate figure of Andy Nashe, the pair of six-shooters in Skip's hands.

"Shoot him, Skip?" he asked mildly. "What'd he do?"

Skip put the guns back in their holsters. An abashed grin crept along his lips.

"Naw, Doc," he said. "I didn't shoot anyone—yet."

Kitty cringed. Not daring to look at Skip when he was in this horn-tossing frame of mind, she went over to give the doctor a hand with the leading man.

"A broken collar bone," Doc Huggins declared, straightening up. "This young feller'll be ridin' the bed wagon for a coupla weeks."

Dave let out a yelp. "What are we gonna do now?" he asked no one in particular.

Some of the cast had finally helped Maxine down from her precarious position on the balcony.

"I can't play *both* Romeo and Juliet," she grumbled. "You'll just have to get another leading man."

"Where are we gonna find an actor in this one-horse town?" Dave moaned.

Skip said casually, "I always had a hankerin' to try my hand at this actin' game."

"Skip!" whispered Kitty fiercely. "You're just doin' this to get even with me!"

"I swear I'm not, Kitty. I always said that if you're an actress then I'm the best actor in the whole world."

Dave regarded him cautiously. "Did you ever play the part of Romeo?" he asked.

"Not yet I haven't," said Skip. "But I'm willin' to give it a twirl."

He's all gurgle and no guts, Kitty told herself sternly. *He wouldn't dare!*

"He does have a voice that projects," Maxine intervened. "We all heard him

when he came in." She looked delighted.

"Thank you, ma'am," Skip said quietly. "But I was madder than a de-rattled rattler then."

"Well, I'm glad you've calmed down," Dave said with relief. "You see it was only a loan—that lumber. We meant to give it back when we were finished with the run of the play."

"Seein' as how you were gonna give it back anyhow, I guess everything's settled then. But how about me tryin' for that there Romeo part?"

"Skip," Kitty wailed again. "You don't know sic 'em about acting!"

"If he's half as good an actor," Maxine cut in scathingly, "as you are a carpenter, he'll do all right."

Kitty opened her mouth but closed it quickly, so as not to give the other girl the satisfaction of knowing how unhappy she now was.

"Gimme a part," Skip said. "I'll give it a goin' over tonight."

Dave found Andy Nashe's script and handed it to him. "There's a heap of lines there to be learned, cowboy," he warned.

"That's all right, Dave." Maxine swayed over to Skip. "I'll be glad to give him *every* help I can."

Kitty just bet her boots she would! Controlling the raging anger which flamed inside, she resorted to one last plea.

"Skip," she begged. "You can't take the time to do this. You—*we* have a house to build!"

And now Skip turned to her, and the coldness in his eyes matched the temperature of his tones.

"Do we?" he said, a wry smile twisting his lips. Then he pointed to the makeshft balcony. "Can't go buildin' a house without any lumber. Reckon I'd have to be stayin' round here anyways, to sorta protect my interests."

The dark-haired actress spoke up, impatiently. ""How about it, Skip? Do we go over your lines tonight? Say—at the Golden Nugget?"

"Nope," he said, and Kitty's heart bucked for joy.

Then he had to go and add, "Too crowded." With a grin, "But I know a place out in the desert. There's a flat-topped rock there, where we can read over these scripts in the moonlight."

A flat-topped rock. . . . Kitty knew the place very well. How often had she and Skip dismounted by it and spent long and blissful evening hours, there! And they hadn't wasted any time *reading* in the moonlight either. But then, if she calculated Maxine Shannon rightly, neither would she and Skip. . . .

KITTY was one huge aching longing, a longing she could only thinly disguise by the radiant smile she fixed on her face. "That's a wonderful idea," she said brightly. "And it'll get you folks out of our way besides." She linked arms with the troupe manager. "Dave and I were gonna hang round here late anyways, and go over my music and . . . things. Weren't we, Dave?"

"What—? Oh yes, yes of course," he said quickly. "Especially things."

She thought she saw Skip frown at that, but the next moment decided she had been mistaken. For Maxine was escorting him to the door, clinging possessively to his arm and the two of them seemed closer than the pupils of a cross-eyed flea.

After an afternoon of rehearsal minus a leading man, the other members of the troupe departed, leaving for hotel rooms and honkatonks. They were all to get together the next evening for the final dress rehearsal—since the night after that was to be the opening performance.

Kitty and Dave were alone in the dimly-lit, deserted opera house.

"Well, Kitty," Dave broke the silence. "Shall we go over that—music you spoke of?"

Slowly, Kitty went over to the piano stool. She sat down and her fingers idled over the keys. Not looking up, she began to play the love song she was to do for the balcony scene.

Midway through, she felt a hand touch her shoulder. It inched along around her neck, and came to rest in the hollow of her throat. She could feel her pulses beating against it.

"Kitty," Dave whispered. He kissed her hair lightly.

She stopped playing and swung around on the stool. His hand dropped from her throat and caught at her waist. Kitty

searched desperately for something—anything to say, but before she could will up the words, Dave's mouth was crushing them back on her lips.

"Kitty . . . Kitty . . ." he declared fervently. "I've been dreamin' 'bout this ever since last night."

"You—have?" she repeated falteringly.

"The way you kissed me last night! Oh, Kitty!"

The way she had kissed him? Kitty racked her feverish thoughts. Goodness knows she hadn't meant anything by it. She had just—well, kissed him. . . . She slipped out of his arms and retreated a little.

"Now look, Dave," she began.

But he hadn't heard her. He was pacing up and down, pounding his fist into his other palm.

"I can just see it now," he said. "We'll travel everywhere— Tombstone, Dodge City, Omaha. Who knows—maybe even California some day! With you there to inspire me and help me, Dave Stone's Dramatic Company will become famous throughout the land. What do you say, Kitty?"

Events were galloping too far and too fast for Kitty. Besides, she wasn't gonna be fooled by his glowing words.

'Help you?" she echoed. "You mean take tickets, play the piano, rustle props—that sort of stuff?"

Dave gave a short laugh. "Sure, beautiful," he said. ""All that—and be near me too. Come on, kid. Will you join the troupe?"

He reached for her, but Kitty stepped back still further. One hand went up to fend him off.

"Now, Dave," she protested. "Give me time to think. I gotta have time to think. Don't rush me now."

"Then think of it, Kitty! Of the excitement of being part of the theater, the people you meet, the thrill of it all. It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

The excitement . . . the people . . . the thrill of it all . . . . Kitty thought about it during those moments, while Dave watched her, a confident smile on his face. Yes, it had been what she had always wanted. But in these few short days, what was it she had gotten?

The excitement? Well, yes, she considered. It sure had been plumb excitin' when the balcony railing had fallen down and struck Romeo on the shoulder, and Skip had come rushing in, sixguns drawn. But somehow, it wasn't the kind of excitement she had expected.

The people you meet? Let's see, she recalled. There was Dave Stone, who was nice enough in his own way, but certainly no great shakes at stirring her heart any. And he had talked her into stealing the precious lumber from the house. Her and Skip's house. . . .

And then there was Maxine Shannon. Sweet Maxine Shannon whose tongue was as barbed as fencing wire and who had a roving eye for the good-looking hombres—who was right now rehearsing her own deadly brand of love scene with Skip. . . .

The thrill of it all? Suddenly and surely, Kitty knew that the only thrill for her, the only excitement, the only happiness, was that of being Skip's wife. Maybe she hadn't known a good thing when it belonged to her, but she sure hoped it wasn't too late to repair that little mistake right now!

She shook her head. "It's no good, Dave," she said softly. "I don't hanker for any part of it."

"Includin' me?"

She didn't hesitate with her reply. "Including you. I'm sorry, Dave, but Skip and I—we're gonna be married."

The smile which had been hovering about his lips now changed to a sneer. He gave a curt snort of laughter.

"*Were* gonna be hitched is more like it," he said derisively. "When Maxine gets through that rehearsal with him tonight, he'll be all hogtied to play a real-life Romeo to her Juliet. Until, that is, she gets tired of him. Like she did Andy Nashe. Yeah, and all the others before him, too."

Kitty caught her breath. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

Dave shrugged. "Simple. If you knew Maxine like I know Maxine, you'd know how seriously she takes her rehearsals—and how seriously her leading men take her." He added sourly, "She's been wantin' to shake Nashe now for the last four towns we hit. And, beautiful, you sure played into her hand. You not only

gave her the opportunity—but you gave her the hombre!"

She had no reply for that. She had seen for herself how Skip had been bewitched by the dark-haired actress. Hadn't he offered to take Romeo's role? And after him swearing up and down that he'd have no truck with the stage!

"I . . . see," she said, and the words were like a lament for a lost love.

"Sure you won't change your mind about joinin' up with the troupe?" Dave asked. "So you can be near Skip when Maxine gets tired of him and goes on to the next one?"

Kitty didn't say anything for several seconds. And at last, when she did, her words came, measured and clipped and stiff as a starched collar.

"I'll see you at dress rehearsal tomorrow," she said. "Good night, Dave."

DRESS rehearsal tomorrow, however, was a whole sleepless night and restless day ahead. Kitty spent all the hours in moody reflection, wishing she had never heard of Dave Stone's Dramatic Company, wishing she had never been bitten by the stage, wishing Maxine Shannon were a little more unattractive, or Skip a little less susceptible. And when she ran out of these unhappy considerations, she found herself wishing Shakespeare's Romeo had never laid eyes on Juliet.

But it was too late. *too late.* The words tolled in her mind like a bell of doom. Skip would probably be a great hit in his role, and Maxine would take him away with her—until she got tired of him and cast him off like an old boot!

And, oh, how Kitty longed to be back in the days when she and Skip were building their house together, and he was all hers!

It was some time during that day that Kitty got her Powerful Idea. Maybe she couldn't prevent Skip from leaving town with Maxine, she reasoned, but she could—and would—keep him from being a hit in this evening's dress rehearsal. Gone were all thoughts of being a successful piano player and ticket taker. Kitty was going to the opera house tonight with but one aim in mind:

To make prize laughing-stocks out of the whole caboodle of 'em—and put a spoke in Mr. Skip Hewitt's wheel, most particularly! . . .

Shortly before the curtain was due to go up, Dave Stone rushed over to where Kitty was sitting at the piano. In the reflected glow from the footlight candles, which she had lit a few minutes before, she looked extremely lovely and extremely provocative in a figure-hugging blue velvet gown, which she had selected for the occasion.

"Kitty!" Dave exploded now. "What in thunder's the meanin' of this?"

She looked up at him, her expression devoid of all guile. "Meaning of what?" she inquired.

Dave gestured to the front row of opera-house seats, where a passel of cowpokes were sprawled out.

"What are they doin' here?" he demanded. "They told me you let 'em in."

" 'Course I did," she said. "They had passes."

"Passes!"

She nodded. "I made them out. After all, I'm in charge of tickets."

Dave ran an agitated hand through his hand. "Kitty," he said patiently, "this is only a dress rehearsal."

Her fingers trilled up the scale. "Can't have a dress rehearsal without *some* people looking on," she declared. "I read it in a book somewheres. Besides—" smiling faintly—"it'll give Skip a chance to get used to an audience, so he won't have buck fever tomorrow night. They're all hands from neighboring spreads."

"Gosh a'mighty, Kitty, they—they brought their *horses* in with them!"

Her smile grew fuller. "I told the boys they could each bring a friend," she said.

Dave swore. "Oh, fine!" and walked away.

Kitty beamed.

She hadn't seen Skip all this while. But when she played the few introductory chords, and the curtain rose creakingly on the balcony scene, there he was on stage—decked out in a dark shirt, tights, and a long flowing cape. Kitty had to turn away to suppress a grin.

"Whoops, m'dear," one of the cowboys yelled.

"Hey, Skip," called another. "You

forgot your chaps!" He whistled loudly. "Get a load of Skip! His longies are showin'."

Skip's face matched the bright red of his hair. From the wings could be heard Maxine's complaining voice.

Hurriedly, Kitty began to play. Only, she managed to hit all the wrong notes, playing as if her fingers were webbed—so that where it should have been soft and dreamy, the music came out all loud and untuneful.

"Uh, let's see now," murmured the redhead, looking up at the ceiling. *"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore in tarnation art thou, Romeo?"*

He stopped, scratched his head. "Reckon them's Julie's lines," he said. "Sorry." He called to Kitty. "A little more soft music, please."

Oblingingly, Kitty played several strains from a funeral dirge.

"He jests at scars," began Skip again, *"that never felt a wound."*

Maxine appeared in the balcony above.

Skip continued. *"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?"*

"Well, I'll be durned," recited Skip. *"It's the East, and Julie is the sun—"*

"No, no!" Maxine screamed down at him. "Not—*well, I'll be durned.*"

"That your line, too?" he inquired politely.

MAXINE was furious. "Why don't you do them the way we rehearsed last night, you—you galoot! Lord knows we didn't do anything else but rehearse!" Kitty joyfully played a sentimental tune.

"I've been thinkin'" drawled Skip. "No one in his right senses would talk that lingo. It ain't even good English."

The others clapped in unison. "Bring on the dancin' girls," they shouted.

Kitty played a polka.

"You," Maxine shrieked down at her. "Stop that horrible noise! It sounds like a jackass in a tin barn."

"Beggin' your pardon, Julie, ma'am," Skip said, "but that happens to be right nice music. Only way I like it. Loud, that way. Kinda reminds me of the bellerin' of cattle."

The cowboys set up an insistent clamor at this point, and for a few minutes, no one could be heard above the ruckus.

Maxine finally got through. "Where's Andy Nashe?" she asked hoarsely. "Why isn't he playing Romeo?"

"On account of he's hurt, Maxine. You know that," Dave told her. "He can't possible appear."

"Then we won't give a performance," said Maxine decisively. "I'm calling the whole thing off! And someone get me down from here!"

Kitty couldn't thing of a single other piece of music to play. For Skip had leaped down from the stage, and was towering over her, his familiar grin warming her heart.

"You won't go away with them, Kitty, willya?" he asked softly. "You won't leave me?"

"Go away with them? Leave you? But—but—" She stopped, shook her head. "I thought *you* were. Dave told me you—"

"Maxine told me," he began.

And then they both stopped. Their laughter rang out.

"Oh, Skip," Kitty whispered. "That's why I brought all the boys here tonight. And why I played such awful music!"

His arms encircled her, drawing her up from the piano stool. "And that's why I gave them that song and dance up there, too. Maxine told me you were sweet on Dave, and I wanted to make him look gosh-darned silly in your eyes."

"There's no one in my eyes but you, Skip," she said softly.

"You're invitin' a kiss, ma'am."

"I kinda hoped I was."

And then at last their lips met. Kitty's hands crept around Skip's neck, and she drew him still closer. . . .

They left the opera house shortly after that, Skip's wagon loaded with wood.

"Wait'll you see the porch you're gonna make out of it now," Skip told her. *"Our* porch."

They climbed up on the wagon seat. Skip picked up the reins, and slowly they drove down the moon-flooded main street of Pony River.

Kitty nestled up real close to Skip, and he ducked his head and kissed her.

"Oh, Romeo . . . " she whispered.

THE END

SAGE BRUSH SERENADE

My heart had long been a ghost-heart;
Its once golden lode had run out,
And all its bright dreams of romance
Had crashed into lovelorn doubt.

So why should I blush to discover
I was humming a soft love song?
And how could I still remember
The words I'd forgotten so long?

I listened—and found that the love song
Which sweetened the mountain air
Echoed the song of a ranger
Striding by with the sun in his hair

Oh, he was so tall and so handsome,
So regal in his proud stride,
I suddenly found myself wishing
That I belonged close at his side.

My heart was a ghost-heart no longer,
But bursting with love strong and true.
The rich golden lode of its romance
Had just come to light anew!

♥ ♥ ♥

—by HARRIET A. BRADFIELD

♥ ♥ ♥

THE CAPTAIN WAS SUSCEPTIBLE

By Noreen Gammill

♥ ♥ ♥

Trying to avoid the river pirates . . .
and keep her single-blessedness—
Captain Kate ran smack into a rakish stowaway.

KATE JETSON slanted her emerald green eyes to the south where a frail mist was sweeping in from the bay. She was anxious to be off before the mist settled into a fog and the *Jane J.* had to fight her way through the soup up river.

The river boat tugged and panted as it strained at its anchor, willing to be off with its cargo of calico and silks, and more precious cargo of imported wines and whiskies from New Orleans.

If the *Jane J.* successfully deposited her precious cargo at her destination this time, Katie Jetson could loll back and take it easy for awhile. For then the money that Pop owed Luke Orlando would be all paid up.

Poor Pop, he always had had a hankerin' for Kate to marry Luke, clear up to the day he died. He figured the river was no place for a gal to settle down. He wanted her to be a lady with pretty laces and velvet skirts and jewels for her slender white throat. But Katie wasn't quite sure she wanted to leave the life of the river, where the wind blew fresh against her cheeks and made her copper hair fly wildly in its freedom . . . where she could wear old levis and a faded shirt, and do as she pleased.

And Katie wasn't at all sure that she wanted to marry Luke. True, he would be a good catch for any girl. He had money and he had looks in a sort of rugged way. Shrewd blue eyes and tawny brown hair. Katie didn't like Luke's eyes. They always made her feel uncomfortable. She wondered how many times he had looked at his "cuties" in his girl show at Shannon Saloon just like he looked at her.

Besides, Luke was positive that she would never get Pop's debt paid off to him, that in sheer relief she would consent to say "yes" to his persistent attentions.

The loss of her recent cargoes by the plundering pirates of Shannon River, was making the long-due debt almost unbearable. She had wagered with Luke on this trip, that if she lost the cargo this time she would marry him. It was getting to be more than a lone gal could endure.

"I won't lose it this time," she muttered to herself as she stood near the prow of the *Jane J.* "They don't know what I've got. The shipping labels all say calico. The river thieves wouldn't bother to stop me for only calico."

Old Whiz Bang, her pilot and right-hand man, was down in the hold of the boat, plastering the false labels now. As soon as he was finished, they would pull anchor and shove off.

Suddenly a voice from behind her interrupted her thoughts. It was as smooth and soft as the blanket of fog closing in on them.

"Got room for a passenger, miss?"

Kate turned quickly to face a pair of black eyes, as black as a storm-filled night. The black eyes belonged to a tall, dark and handsome man dressed in the garb of a dandy. He had taken off his hat and his black hair rippled back from his fine high

"This is one woman you're not going to kiss. Get off this boat."

forehead in black smooth waves. His fine aquiline nose sculptored down to a pair of well curved, but firm lips.

His suit was of the finest broadcloth and his dark velvet vest was the color of river water at night. He might have been a banker dressed like that, but on the other hand, he could be a sporting man who haunted those gambling palaces in New Orleans.

His slow smile sent Katie's heart trembling.

"How did you get on this boat?" she blurted angrily.

"Jumped over from the landing," he said, with a twist of his eyebrow.

"The *Jane J.* carries nothing but cargo," she said loudly. "I'm not interested in passengers."

HE SET his satchel down on the deck of the boat, then walked over to her. Looking down into her green eyes that were gleaming with fire, his black ones were both piercing and soft. He caught her hand.

"Maybe I could interest you in one." His smile spread.

She tried to jerk away from him. "You get off my boat or I'll have Whiz Bang throw you in the water!"

His arms caught her then and held her hard, despite her struggling.

"Reckon I can handle this Whiz Bang. In fact, I reckon I can handle you. They told me down in the shipping offices the owner of the *Jane J.* would be hard to convince."

Kate's mouth spread in scarlet tenseness. Flinging back her head until her hair made a copper shawl over her shoulders, she glared defiantly up into the dark eyes sparking amusing glints. With her small brown fists, she struck against his hard chest.

"You no-good nincompoop," she cried. "Let go of me. This is one woman you're not going to kiss. Get off this boat."

His mouth was dangerously close and Kate thought, *"If he kisses me, I'll scream. That will fetch Whiz Bang."*

But even while the anger churned inside and her eyes were angry pools of green flame, something stirred in her veins. The man's touch had sent her pulses pounding and she couldn't control the fast rhythm of her heart.

This is ridiculous, her brain seethed. *A perfect stranger bounces on my boat, and his arms are like magic.* Would his kiss be magic too? Who was he? Why did he want to go up-river on her boat? She was sure now he was one of those gamblers from the city.

"Look, little river gal, it's important I get to Shannon Point in four days." His black eyes were somber. "That's your destination. It won't hurt you to take me on."

He let loose of her then. He wasn't going to kiss her, even though his eyes had held that promise.

She stepped away from him, her chin jerking up, "I said this was a cargo boat, mister. Skedaddle!"

His jaw tensed. His figure stiffened. As he started to turn, Whiz Bang came up out of the hatch. The pilot's old, warped face was wrinkled like a prune. He immediately saw that Kate was in trouble.

"What's this here stranger want, Katie?" he wheezed.

"A free ride to Shannon Point," she answered, the anger still echoing in her voice.

The man faced Whiz Bang. "I'm willing to pay my way. I'm buying a cargo boat from Luke Orlando and if I don't get it in four days, my option is up and I'll lose it."

A hot flush swept Kate's cheeks and she twisted sharply to him. "And you think I'll haul you up river to get a boat to run in competition to mine? Are you crazy, mister? I'm not that loco."

"Reckon you'd better get, Fancy Clothes," said Whiz Bang.

The sun was a faint reflection on the horizon, as the mist thickened. Long gray fingers of fog reached out towards the boats anchored in the harbor, causing renewed activity on the wharf. It was going to be a thick night.

Whiz Bang went over to the side of the boat to unload his mouth, full of chewing tobacco. "When the little lady says *no,* she usually means it."

There was a silent tableau for a split second, with the man probing deep into Katie's eyes. Then he turned quickly and left them.

As his tall figure disappeared over the side of the boat and was lost in the busy activity of the wharf workers, Katie noticed that he had forgotten his satchel.

She stared down at it in disgust, bent to read the name engraved on the silver piece attached to the handle.

Curt Royal. A fancy-enough name for one that dressed as fancy as he did. She was sure now he was a gambling man. He was probably buying Luke Orlando's boat *The River Belle* to turn it into a gambling ship, and he was going to ply his trade from Shannon Point to the gulf.

Katie looked over to the wharf where he had disappeared and she said aloud, "Buying Luke Orlando's tub!" Then quickly to Whiz Bang, "Let's shove off, Whiz. We've got to get out of this fog before night drops."

The old man ambled over to the valise and looked down at it for a long time. "Katie, did it come to your mind that feller might be in cahoots with them river pirates?" His wrinkled face screwed up into a thousand lines.

Kate's heart skipped a beat and a frown puckered her brows. "No, I never thought of it. If I had let him come aboard, maybe we would have found out something important. Oh, Whiz Bang, I'm always letting my temper get the best of me. Why didn't I let him stay?"

And somewhere deep within her a secret whisper fluttered! *"Yes, why didn't you let him stay? His arms had the feel of magic in them. They were strong. His lips were strong and his face had the strength of character that you had always admired in a man."* Maybe he would remember his satchel and come hurrying back for it, she secretly hoped.

But the glow in the western sky had turned to purple and the water had changed to black. In a few minutes, it would be night—and he hadn't returned.

Whiz Bang turned his attention to getting the engine started, while Katie pulled anchor. Old Pop Jetson had never had any hands except his old friend Whiz Bang to run and operate the *Jane J.* He allowed there were enough wharf hands both ends of his trips that wanted to earn some extra money loading and unloading his cargoes. So Katie carried on in the tradition of her father.

Whiz Bang, in the pilot's cabin, edged the boat carefully from her berth and headed her north. The men on the landing waved their usual good-bys to Katie as she stood at the prow, proud and eager as she always was when her boat had negotiable wares. But a sharp tinge of disappointment flowed through her. The man . . . Curt Royal . . . hadn't come back after his belongings.

S THE boat was righted and started on her course, Katie looked down in the dark water at the side of the *Jane J.* and noticed the water churning against its side. Then a head emerged and she caught the flash of a bright smile in the deepening fog, and a pair of dark eyes laughing up at her.

"I forgot my satchel," he called out.

Katie seethed. What did he expect her to do, throw it in the water? Then she really got mad. No, he expected to be hauled aboard. He had deliberately planned this, so he would be taken on as a passenger on the *Jane J.*

"You've got a long way to go to get it," she screamed down at him.

She noticed that he now wore only his trousers, and his back was rippling with hard muscles, brown as an Indian's.

"You mean I've got to swim to Shannon Point?" He squinted his eyes in mocked pain.

She leaned down and rested her elbows on the rail. "Yep." But the whisper in her heart started dashing about in circles. *Haul him up . . . haul him up . . . you want to!*

She allowed a small smile to creep around the corners of her red lips. He swam as smoothly as if he had been raised in the water.

"If that's your verdict, reckon I'll have to live up to your expectations," and he chuckled as the water covered his head and he came up again for air.

Suddenly she went mid-boat and swung a rope ladder over its side. Pop had made it special for her, when they lay at anchor and she had wanted to take a swim in the river.

The *Jane J.* was moving faster now and he had difficulty grabbing a hold. But it was only minutes before he was standing

before her, panting and dripping like a magnificent creature from the deep.

"You had me worried there." He grinned, and the grin was as clean and fresh as the fog that swirled about them. His voice came in soft pants. "I figured if I couldn't go as a passenger, you might let me stowaway."

She returned his warmth with a cold, green stare. "You know what happens to stowaways. They're locked up."

"Yes, ma'am," he said drinking in her emerald eyes with their tangle of dark lashes. "That would be a real pleasure if you're there."

Her heart flew wildly to her throat, as she started grimly down the hatch to the cabins below. At the door, he caught her arm and swung her around to him.

"I just want to thank you for saving my life," he whispered, crushing her to him. His hand found the back of her head and brought her lips to his in one wild surge.

It was so sudden, Katie had no time to cry out. And she had been right. His kiss was as magic as his arms. Cool with the taste of river water, but a pressure that was warm and overwhelming. Luke Orlando's kisses never brought trickles creeping up her spine or sent her trembling from her toes to her head.

It was over in a second and she pushed away from him.

"Look Mister Fancy-Breeches," she cried. "I told you not to try to manhandle me. Get your precious satchel and get below. Locking you up is too good for you. You're going to scrub decks, mister. . . ."

The *Jane J.* docked at Shannon Point exactly twenty-four hours ahead of schedule. She had safely pushed her way past Pirates' Bend and eased into the river town, her cargo intact.

Katie threw her reflection a smug smile, as she dressed to go ashore to see Luke. It was the first time Luke hadn't been standing on the boat landing to greet her. Old Whiz had really pushed on the engine to make the unscheduled appearance, because he said, "Them thieves'll be lookin' for us a day late," and he gave a self-satisfied chuckle.

Katie glanced at the clock on her small dressing table. It was almost five o'clock. She would have to hurry to get to Luke's Shannon Saloon before the rowdy night crowds began to congregate.

Curt Royal was gone. He had disappeared right after they had docked the *Jane J.* Neither she nor Whiz Bang could draw talk from Curt. So she was no nearer learning the reason for his purchase of Luke Orlando's boat than she had been three days ago.

He had been obedient, courteous, and he hadn't tried to kiss her once. Only his eyes caressed her. It was maddening, when the memory of his impetuous kiss kept creeping back to send her pulses flaming. He hadn't even told them goodby.

Katie tossed back her copper curls and defiantly pulled open her cabin door. No-good gambler! Whiz Bang had given him the proper name all right. Fancy Breeches!

As she came on deck, the old man came down from the pilot's cabin.

"Where you goin', sis, all prettied up in your best bib and tucker?"

She smiled brightly. "I'm headed for Luke's, Whiz. I've got a little gloating to do. Forget that I've just won a wager with that slick gentleman?"

Whiz Bang's face screwed up into a hundred wrinkles. "I wish you wouldn't go until morning. Tellin' Luke can wait until tomorrow. Besides, as soon as he hears you're docked, he'll come hot-footin' it down here."

A mysterious smile crept into the corners of Katie's lips, and she continued, "I'm going to warn him about a certain Mister Fancy-Breeches from New Orleans. Luke won't like selling his boat to a stranger who might be the brains behind all this skullduggary on our river. . . ."

LUKE'S place was a five-minute walk. Katie could have taken the old hack that always met the river steamers, but she wanted the feel of the earth on her feet and the walk gave her a chance to say hello to people she knew along the busy, dusty street.

When she reached the Shannon Saloon, she went around the side and entered Luke's private entrance. As she started

down the narrow hall that led to his office, she heard voices. One was Luke's and the other reminded her of smooth, soft fog drifting over river water.

"But I can't give possession of *The River Belle* immediately," Luke was saying. "You're a day ahead of time. The papers will have to be signed tomorrow before a notary."

The other voice said, "The boat's docked. Any objection if I look her over again?"

Luke chuckled. "Certainly not, Royal." There was a brief silence; then the door swung open and the two men stepped into the hall.

Katie was at the point of fleeing, so that Curt couldn't see her, but their action caught her right in the middle of the entry way. Her lips dried as she tried to smile, and she clutched her small purse nervously against her.

Luke saw her first. "Katie! What a surprise! I was expecting you tomorrow." A flush swept his gaunt, hard features.

Curt turned his dark eyes on her and a smile played in their dark depths.

"Meet the new owner of *The River Belle,*" Luke drawled.

Katie stiffened. "We've met," she said curtly. "And the less I see of him the better." Her sharp words brought an impertinent grin from Curt. Luke Orlando's brows lifted in surprise.

"The lady evidently doesn't like you," said the owner of the Shannon Saloon, twisting his sharp eyes from the girl to the tall stranger.

Katie turned quickly to go into Luke's office. "I don't like him and I don't like the idea of you selling that boat to him!"

Curt dug his thumbs deep in his belted trousers. He gave a jerk with his dark head toward the angry girl in the doorway and said to Luke, "That gal doesn't like to be manhandled in any way. We're going to have us a great time as the months go by."

Katie emitted an exasperated "Oh," and went into the small room. Luke followed her and closed the door. She threw her purse on his desk in a flare of anger and began pacing the floor.

"You can't sell that boat to that man, Luke," she cried, while her eyes blazed green fire. "You don't know who he is."

Luke caught her firmly by the shoulders. "Look, honey. I don't care who he is. He's giving me a fair price for that old tub. I wouldn't pass up the chance for anything."

Then he caught her to him and found her lips. Something surged within her, like a sharp, happy pain. Tomorrow Luke would have his cargo of liquor and after that, she would never again have to feel his clumsy hands around her waist or feel his eager mouth against her lips.

She pulled from him. "You'd take a chance even if he happens to be the brains behind all this river piracy?"

Luke's face tensed and there was something about the look he threw her which sent a fear flying to her heart. "Where'd you pick up such a wild idea? You just get all such notions out of that pretty little head of yours and start thinking about us. I was figuring that maybe we could get hitched this trip. I'll forget all about the rest of that money your Pop owed me, honey."

He still thought she was going to marry him. And she had to make him think

that, until the cargo was safely unloaded. Then she would slip the *Jane J.* quietly out of the small harbor and steam back to New Orleans. It wouldn't do to cross Luke at this stage, for Luke Orlando's anger was a thing to be avoided. Tomorrow, Pop's debt would be paid off and she could breathe the free air again.

Suddenly she twisted around. Her green eyes flashed defiantly. "I just wanted to warn you, Luke. The main reason I came into town was to do a little gloating. You've lost your wager, Mister Gambler. I've got my cargo intact—and tomorrow morning you can unload her."

He gave her a wary smile, as his arms closed about her again. "I may have lost my wager, my little green-eyed beauty, but I haven't lost you. And any of these hombres that try their embracing on you, just let me know, honey—because you're mine. My trespassin' sign hangs right over that heart of yours."

Her fear of him grew. To cover up her confusion, she threw him an enticing smile. "Don't be too sure, Mr. Orlando. I'm not married to you yet."

"But you will be," he said grimly, leading her to the door. "How about a dinner and a bottle of wine to toast the bride-to-be?"

She forced herself to be gay. "I'd love the dinner, but let's leave toasting the bride until later."

Luke's hard gray eyes became possessive. "Anything you say, honey. I've got all the time in the world. I can wait."

They had their dinner in one of the private booths with Luke's right-hand boy running back and forth from the kitchen with all her favorite dishes.

The evening crowd of bawdy, loud ranchers and river men were beginning to congregate, when they were finished. Luke tried to persuade her to stay and see his new girl show, but she had been gone longer than she had planned and Whiz Bang would be worried.

The early evening was heavy with silence, as Katie went aboard the *Jane J.* and started down to her cabin. A new moon gave out a faint glow, and the dim lights from the wharf and other craft tied up at the dock only emphasized the stillness. Even the riding light on her own boat wasn't lit. Katie wondered about it. Whiz Bang was always so particular about that certain one.

WHEN she came to the steps that led up to the pilot's house, her blood froze in her veins. Whiz Bang lay sprawled in the narrow doorway in deathly stillness. Across his thin head, blood had dried in his sparse gray hair.

With a cry Katie dropped down beside him. His heart was beating faintly and a low groan came from his lips. She tried to move his body . . . to cradle his head in her lap.

"Whiz! Whiz!" she cried, tears smarting down her cheeks. "What happened? It's Katie. How did you get hurt?"

His wrinkled old eyes flickered and he whispered weakly, "Cargo."

A seering flash of white anger swept through her. Had some one tried to monkey with the cargo while she was ashore visiting Luke? Frantically she peered through the ominous darkness in the direction of the other boats anchored at the dock. The fishing barge *Miss Daisy* lay black and deserted off the bow of the *Jane J. The River Belle,* Luke Orlando's old cargo boat that Curt Royal was buying, lay at her stern. A dim light glowed from its cabin. Some one was on board.

She ran toward the back of the boat and gave a frantic "hello" to the sleeping craft. She called a second and third time. Only the remnant of her voice returned as an answer.

As she turned to go back to the old man on the deck, she saw that he was trying to move, and he was mumbling incoherently.

"Katie . . . cargo . . . gone . . . horn-swoggled sidewinders . . . they . . . tool it. . . ."

Katie whipped about and flew down the narrow steps into the hold where Whiz Bang had labeled the boxes: *Calico.*

It was empty. Her entire cargo of wine and imported whiskies, along with the bolts of dress goods, had completely vanished.

A feeling of dispair shook her. For the first time since her Pop had died, she let tears wrack her body. Luke would have

his way now. She would have to marry him, because she had lost the wager. What a stupid fool she had been to leave the boat to gloat over her victory! A shallow victory, now.

But who could have tipped off the thieves? How could they have moved the cargo so quickly? Hot fury dried the tears sweeping through her, and she stomped her foot.

"No daughter of Pop Jetson will put up with it!" she cried. "I'm going to find out who's at the bottom of this. Luke Orlando was the only one who knew I had docked. Luke and—Curt Royal!"

She ran back to Whiz Bang. "That no-good Fancy Breeches is to blame for this," she wailed.

Whiz Bang had managed to lift himself to sitting position. "I ain't never seen them ranahans before," he said weakly.

"I'm going ashore and get the doc, Whiz. You've got a bad head cut."

But before she could reach the narrow gangplank, a tall lanky figure loomed in front of her. His crisp, black hair was hatless and he was dressed in clean levis and a plaid shirt. Kate Jetson's heart tumbled. If he was the one who was at the bottom of stealing her cargo, he certainly had a lot of nerve showing up now.

He was as spic and clean as any one of the dudes who frequented Luke's saloon. He looked like he had the day he had first come on her boat. Now here he was again, looming out of the dusky night, to tease her heart and send a tingling sensation up her spine. He might be doing this, showing up on her boat, just to cover up.

"I thought I heard some one call," he said with concern. "I was just coming along the dock to take a look at *The River Belle*. What's the matter? Something wrong?"

It might have been her despair or the sheer relief that he was there to help, but Katie threw herself into his arms.

"Curt," she cried and the emerald eyes came alive with dark pin-points of fear. "Somebody struck Whiz. He's got to have a doctor."

His arms were sweet refuge. How she wished she could stay in them forever. No—how she wished she could long for Luke's arms like this. It would make it so easy then to marry the saloon owner.

But Whiz Bang needed attention. Curt did a quick turn to the old man's side. Then, as if the old pilot were a little boy, Curt lifted him gently into his arms and started toward the cabins.

"I think we can fix him up without going to a doc," said Curt, examining Whiz Bang's injured head. "It'll be better that way. You won't have to answer a lot of questions. Right now, that's important." His black eyes were filled with mysterious lights.

Katie wished she could throw from her mind her dark suspicions about him. She wanted to tell him about the stolen cargo, but if she did—that would put him on his guard. He might try to make a quick getaway then. No, it was better she keep still. Luke would have a way to handle him.

The moon had left the sky when Curt started off the *Jane J.* They had fixed up Whiz Bang's head, Katie had made steaming coffee for him to drink, and now he was asleep in his bunk. Only a few stray stars were left to light the sky.

"It's too late to examine *The River Belle* tonight," Curt said gazing at the boat. "Reckon the morning will do just as well."

He took her hand. "Take care, Katie. And don't worry about old Whiz. He'll be all right. The cut isn't too deep."

A delicious thrill passed through her when he touched her. His kiss was still a living memory in her brain. She didn't want him to leave. She wanted the feel of his nearness, his hand holding hers, his shoulder leaning against her own.

Why was she fighting this feeling she had for him? She wanted to love him, but a small cloud of anger and suspicion kept twisting itself within her. She knew he had something to do with her vanished cargo.

Of a sudden, he pulled her to him and crushed his mouth against her soft lips. He kept them there for a star-filled minute, then whispered, "Katie . . . Katie . . . I can't leave you." He buried his face in her copper-colored hair. "I love you. I want to hold you like this forever. I know you hate me. I can hardly blame you. I've done nothing but aggravate you for three days."

Kate Jetson didn't move. His kiss had sent her senses reeling to the fainting stars about them.

"I fell in love with you back in New Orleans," he continued. "I can't ask you to marry me . . . not yet. Got a little unfinished business to attend to."

The words stung deep. There it was again—the doubt that crowded her heart. But even with this ugly thing that hung between them, she wanted him near and so she said, "You haven't a place to sleep tonight. Better crawl in your bunk above Whiz Bang's."

She jerked from him and went swiftly to her own cabin. At the door, she turned. He was still standing where she had left him. She went in and closed her door.

"But he knows about my cargo—and for that, I hate him," she muttered angrily. Katie knew he had decided to stay for she heard his footsteps descending into Whiz Bang's cabin below.

KATIE was frying eggs and sausage in the galley the next morning, when Whiz Bang came in. His head was still bandaged, but he was as lively as a young river snake and his sense of humor had returned.

Her green eyes were soft with compassion for the old man, but changed to smouldering emerald fire as she said, "Well our Fancy Breeches has gone again without so much as a good morning or a thank you." She slammed the coffee pot hard against the surface of the coal stove.

"Whiz, there's dirty work someplace." Her hands clenched themselves into hard balls. "If Curt Royal didn't steal our cargo, he knows who did."

As she put the food on Whiz's plate, tears crept over her thick, tangled lashes, and she bit her lower lip in vexation. Whiz Bang squinted up into her swimming, tear-filled eyes.

"You're in love with Fancy Breeches, ain't you?" He chuckled.

"I don't know, Whiz," she said with irritation. "He's fresh and clean and strong, but he acts like a hombre who's got bad plans in his head. He's like a wild fox . . . wary."

The old man grinned. "He shore knowed how to fix me up."

For a brief second the bubbling coffee was the only sound in the boat's kitchen. Then Whiz Bang, with his mouth full of food, ventured, "Why don't you get Luke to do something? He's got influence. He's selling *The River Belle* to Fancy Breeches. He ought to have some kind of an idee about the feller."

Katie's choked voice was full of disdain as she answered, "Luke hasn't done anything in the past about helping me to trace down these thieves and I reckon he won't this time. This fits into his plans perfectly. I can't pay off the debt now, so he knows I'll marry him. And I suppose I will. I never went back on my word in my life."

A heavy figure appeared in the entrance. "Somebody using my name in vain?" It was Luke. The expression on his rugged face was like that of a self-satisfied Chesire Cat.

"You haven't got your cargo, like you said." He smiled smugly.

Kate jerked her head toward Whiz Bang. "Somebody unloaded it last night while I was ashore with you and almost killed Whiz." Her lips penciled themselves into a straight line. "Luke, you've got to find out who did it. This sort of thing has got to stop."

He went to her and slipped his arms around her. "From now on you won't have that to worry you. We'll sell the *Jane J.* and you won't have to bother that pretty red head of yours another bit."

She pulled out of his arms and busied herself with pouring coffee, not daring to look at him—for Curt Royal's kiss still burned her lips.

"I'll marry you, but I won't sell the *Jane J.* That's part of me," she said coldly.

Luke settled himself opposite the old man at the table and scrutinized her sharply. "So you think Royal is at the head of these river pirates?"

"He might be." She still avoided his eyes. Her voice was low and husky.

Luke took his time to roll a cigarette. Then furtively, he said: "He might even have loaded your cargo on *The River Belle.*"

Katie's green eyes came alive then with sparks of yellow flame and her brows came together in an angry frown. "That's

it," she cried. "That's what he's done. How else could it have been unloaded so quickly?" She flew to the door and up the stairs to the deck.

Luke followed. "Katie, where are you going?"

She turned on him like a young wildcat. "I'm going to pay a visit to *The River Belle*. I'm going to see if he has got my cargo."

Luke caught her arm roughly. "Katie, look."

She followed his gaze. *The River Belle* was in mid-stream and headed down the river with the current. Curt Royal was standing near its bow. When he saw them, he gave Katie a curt salute. His bare head was shining and crisp looking in the early morning sun.

"He can't do this," she screamed. "Do something, Luke. Don't let him get away."

"He's got the right," he returned calmly, but his muscles twisted in his jaw. "He bought the boat along with Tarpy, that pilot of mine. The papers were signed not an hour ago."

"But if he's got my cargo—"

Luke's lips curled into a sarcastic smile, "He won't get far. Pirates' Bend isn't very far down river."

Katie ran back to the galley to tell Whiz Bang what had happened, while Luke went ashore.

All morning she thought of Luke's words. *He won't get far. Pirates' Bend isn't very far down river.*

What could he mean? The bend was the only spot where a boat could be attacked, where the unloading would go unnoticed. If Curt was in cahoots with the river bandits, that's where he would head for. Luke had promised to get the sheriff and a posse on hand.

How could she ever have been thrilled by this river man's arms or felt the magic of his lips? All she wanted to do now was find him and get her cargo back. She stumbled up the steps to the pilot house, where Whiz Bang was oiling his wheel.

"What's the matter with us, Whiz? Get the engine going. We're going after him. We're going down the river to Pirates' Bend."

His old eyes danced. "That's a gal. I haven't chased a boat for thirty years, but I'm not too old to do it again. I'll get her steamed up so fast you can't say Jack Robinson."

PIRATES' BEND was a small cove in the twist of the river, about ten miles downstream from Shannon Point. Approaching from the upstream side, it couldn't be seen—but coming downstream, the entrance to the inlet could be seen for several miles.

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As the *Jane J.* steamed along the middle of the river, Katie watched from the pilot's cabin with Whiz Bang for the familiar painted letters on *The River Belle's* side.

The water sparkled in the high sunlight, and only the river seemed serene. Katie was torn between her eager revenge and the memory of a kiss.

Then they saw it. *The River Belle* was crouched in the shadows of the bend. A small tug was hugging her side and men were lifting boxes over the side.

Kate Jetson's heart tumbled. She had been right. Curt Royal was nothing but a good-for-nothing river thief.

"Swing her around toward the shore, Whiz. Keep her close so they can't see us. I'm going to swim into the cove."

"Now, Katie, what good would that do? A gal amongst all them sidewinders."

But Katie was already slipping out of her boots and had headed for her rope ladder. "I can give one particular sidewinder a piece of my mind," she called out.

As Katie let the current drift her toward Priates' Bend, she could see the last of the boxes being put aboard the small boat. It was her cargo, all right, for she could see the word *Calico* printed on the boxes. By the time she had floated under water and reached the deep shade of the overhanging brush which feathered the shore, the boat had gone. And as she struggled to gain a hold to pull herself up to the side of *The River Belle*, it had disappeared. Complete silence hung over the boat. Katie, dripping with river water, made her way to the pilot's cabin. Tarpy, the pilot, was gone.

Then she crept cautiously down to the cabins below. Had Curt deserted the river boat, too?

She gave a startled gasp as she flung open the main cabin door. Trussed up with stout rope was Curt Royal, with a gag in his mouth and a bandage on his eyes. He was trying to loosen the rope.

She ran to him and untied the bandage on his eyes, and jerked the gag from his mouth.

Finally she freed him. He sat on the floor and shook his head like a shaggy dog. "Wow! I sure got myself a load of trouble this time." Then he pulled himself to his feet, caught Katie's eyes and drew her to him. "Thanks, little green-eyed angel. They did a good job, didn't they?"

She reached up and took his face in her hands. "All I care about is, who did it? Luke was supposed to bring the sheriff and his men to stop you unloading."

His face screwed up in alarm and he stiffened. "You thought I stole your cargo?"

She nodded her head, as she pressed it hard against his broad chest.

His arms went quickly around her. "My little river gal, I've been trying to protect it. I'm a Government man sent out to locate the leaders of this traffic."

His face above hers was grave. "Yes. I knew your cargo was on *The River Belle*. I deliberately started down river with it to Pirates' Bend. When Tarpy, Luke's pilot swung the boat into the cove, then I knew I was on the right trail. I didn't really suspect their leader until I heard his voice after they had blindfolded my eyes. Fortunately, they didn't stop up my ears, so I heard everything."

She backed away from him and her voice was thin. "Luke! Luke Orlando!"

He nodded grimly. "They unloaded your stuff and put it on *The River Belle* last evening, before you got back."

Katie was stunned. Luke had brought assistance all right. He had brought his rannies and his thugs. Luke was the leader of the river pirating. That was the reason it had always been so easy for him to know about her boat and her goods. He had been pillaging her cargo time after time, keeping her bound to him. She shuddered when she thought how close she had come to marrying him.

"But how will they catch him?"

"They take the stuff inland a few miles to a deserted store on the road to Shannon Point. We've got a small regiment of soldiers planted there this time. They'll get them. I can identify Orlando's voice and you can identify your boxes of *calico*."

Her arms went around his neck. "Mister Fancy-Breeches, can't you ask me to marry you now?"

His mouth dropped to hers in a flame of eagerness, answering Katie for always.

BUTTONS AND BEAUS

Howdy, Friends,

Every month we've been bringing you walloping romantic yarns of courageous frontiersmen and the beautiful cow bunnies they loved who worked together to build the great West. That's why we think you'll be interested in seeing a different kind of romance in the new film, "The Big Wheel." It's a vigorous story of plucky pioneers. But, instead of pioneering out in cowboy country, these hombres are auto-racing pilgrims.

Mary Hatcher, the girl mechanic in this United Artists movie, finds herself having a spanking good time when she meets that young racer, Mickey Rooney. Together, they'll fascinate you with a moving picture of men and women fighting side by side to conquer a new kind of frontier.

In "The Big Wheel," the heroine is a lady mechanic—and in Art Lawson's gay new novel in the next issue, the heroine is a lady lumberjack, as pretty and pert a petticoat entrancer as you could wish to know. You'll meet her in WHO'LL KISS A LADY LUMBERJACK?, in next month's issue.

There you'll find that lovely Jane McCarty knew she was heading for trouble when she palavered herself into a job as a lady lumberjack, but she hadn't figured on the trouble coming in the shape of a railroad man who's very scowl made her heart flutter. Below is a preview:

CHUCK was waiting outside, looking both eager and apologetic. Jane slanted her deep blue eyes at him, flicking her long lashes. She climbed into the wagon and gathered the reins, ignoring his bowing to her and his excuses for insulting her. "Beat it," she said.

Powerful as a steam engine, her six horses walked daintily as kittens. Chuck swung up to sit beside her.

"Going you way," he said. "Sure do appreciate your invitation to ride along a space."

"You're not welcome," Jane said.

After Chuck had stared at her for more that a minute without saying a word, she faced up to him.

"What's the matter, Chucky?" she asked. "You near-sighted?"

"Nope," he said soberly. "But I guess I have been all my life up to today. Matter of fact, I must have been blind. Anyway, I never did see anything like you. Those eyes—like the old swimming hole at high noon on a hot day with a big old trout swimming underneath, while us fellers was basking in the sun. That nose—sticking up like the hammer on my old Smith and Wesson. Your mouth—" He scowled.

"I know," she cut in quickly. "Like a number-ten beaver trap."

"You got something there," he said with a grin. "Why not take it easy, kid? You and me are going to be friends a long time. Why not give me a smile and tell me you're sorry that I'm sorry I insulted you?"

She made a great, big mock smile.

"That's mighty pretty," he said. "You look like you were getting ready to bite off a thread. Which reminds me, I got a couple of buttons off a shirt. I'll bring it around tonight and you can sew them on."

"I like that!" she said indignantly.

"I like it, too." He grinned. "It's going to be nice having a lady in camp who can do the little things for a feller that he has trouble doing. Say—" She had begun to smile despite her determination not to. "Those are the prettiest red lips I ever did see. Like fresh strawberries with the dew still on them."

"Oh!" she gasped.

"End of the ride for me," he said, and while her mouth was making its circle, he kissed her, lightly but with authority, and then vaulted from the wagon.

Jane hoped she'd never see Chuck again—but that evening she had visitors: the railroad man *and* a red-headed buffalo hunter who could sing her into heaven. From then on the courting gets livelier, with delightful surprises to intrigue you, in Art Lawson's WHO'LL KISS A LADY LUMBERJACK? . . . as well as other heart-warming Western love stories by your favorite authors, all in the March RANGELAND ROMANCES — published January 27th. THE EDITOR

MISS LONESOME'S DECEPTION

SHE saw him, recognized him the instant he stepped down from the stage outside the Express office. He seemed taller than she'd remembered him; he seemed to tower over the other passengers alighting. And he was thinner than she remembered him—but that was only natural. The three months in the hospital had done that and put a pallor on his face.

But, somehow, those things made him even more handsome. As he stood, hesitantly, looking around, she saw that his crisp black hair still curled down over his forehead. He was so good-looking it made her ache just to look at him.

Standing by the buckboard, she suddenly flung up her hand, cried: "Tim! Tim Halloran! Over here!"

He turned and started toward her. Her heart, already beating overfast, began to leap like a caged thing. She could hardly get her breath. He walked toward her, staring at her, frowning and puzzled. He stopped hesitantly in front of her.

"Pardon, ma'am," he said, and the sound of his voice was like sweet fiddle music in her ears. "Did I hear you call my name? I—" He stopped. Enlightenment spread over his face, and it broke out in that dazzling, heart-breaking smile, all flashing white teeth and the blue eyes getting lost as they crinkled up.

"Linda!" he yelled. "Little Linda Marquand, Jean's kid sister! Honey, you've changed so that I didn't even know you right off!"

She felt her cheeks getting flushed. Her eyes dropped and she held her breath while his gaze ran over the slender curves delicately emphasized by her tight-fitting cornflower blue levis and shirt. When she looked up at him again, she caught his eyes lingering like a caress on the deep waves of her wheat-gold hair. Seeing the frank admiration in his gaze, she took courage.

"Changed, Tim?" she said. "How do you mean?" She thought she knew what he meant but she wanted to make sure. She wanted to hear it from his own lips.

The old little laughing devils that she knew so well began to dance in his eyes as he said, grinning: "Why, three years ago when I went away to war against the Yankees, you were just a pigtailed, long-legged string bean of a button. Remember, we used to call you The Pest, Jean and I? You were always around, always in the way when I came courtin'."

She nodded, choking up a little. She remember all right. She hadn't meant to be in the way. It was just that even then, even though Jean and Tim thought of her as just a pesky young'n, Linda was beginning to mature emotionally. She was already falling in love with Tim Halloran and just had to be around when he was there, to watch and worship his every move. It had been mostly hero worship, then. But that young love had grown and rounded out in much the same way that her figure had, until now it was full and mature and beautiful.

"Yes," she said, looking up at him, her long-lashed eyes star-bright. "I remember, Tim. Are—Tim—are you glad to be back?"

"Glad!" He whooped. "I'll show you how glad I am!"

He reached out and his big hands caught her around the waist, raised her up, blushing and kicking and protesting faintly as people on the street stopped to watch and laugh. He kissed her, then, a rough, hard, big-brotherly kiss, at first.

But the moment his mouth touched hers, something happened all inside of Linda Marquand. It was like the moment a long, slow-burning fuse finally reaches

Lissome Linda hoped to win the soldier's love—
by pretending to be her flirtatious sister.

"Don't carry on so," Tim said.

By Robert Turner

the gunpowder. It was like an explosion.

She stopped struggling, kicking; she forgot about the people watching them on the street. She clasped her hand behind Tim's touseled head and held his kiss warmly against her mouth long after he would have drawn it away. She felt his fingers tighten about her waist. She felt his lips respond to the challenge of her own. The street and the false-fronted buildings seemed to tip and then spin dizzily, and she had to close her eyes.

Then it was over. Tim was setting her back down on her feet. Linda swayed dizzily, and Tim had to grab her arm to keep her from falling. She looked up at him. He was shaking his head groggily, as though recovering from a blow. A blush stained his pale face a fiery red.

He glanced around at the smiling people on the plank walk watching them. Grabbing Linda's arm, Tim said huskily: "Come on, honey, let's get out of here!"

They stepped toward the buckboard, and Tim helped her up onto the high seat. He ran around and climbed up onto the driver's side, grasped the reins. He flicked the horses and they hit out down Main Street fast. Neither of them spoke those first few moments.

Linda felt like a fool, giving herself away the first moment she met Tim, like that. Now he must know how she really felt about him. He was probably feeling sorry for her—the little girl in love with her older sister's sweetheart. But wait until he found out the whole story! He'd hate her, then. She realized now what a terrible thing it was that she had done, to fool Tim all the years that he was away, fighting for the South. How could she make him understand?

For a moment, panic swept her, knowing that soon she would have to tell him, break the bad news. She thought about leaping down from the buckboard and running across the range as fast as her legs could carry her. But then it was too late, as she heard Tim say:

"Where's Jean, honey? How come she didn't come down to town to meet me?"

They were now driving along the broad trail outside of town. The air was warm and scented with the smell of rangeland flowers. They passed a homesteader's place, where a young man and woman, with their arms about each others' shoulders, waved to them. Everything could have been so perfect. Riding along with Tim like this could be the happiest moment of her life—if things were different.

"Linda," he said softly. "I asked you a question."

"I know," Linda answered, trying to keep her voice from breaking. "I—Tim—I'm trying to think of a way to break it to you gently but I—I can't. Tim, Jean *couldn't* come to meet you. She isn't out at the ranch any more. Jean's gone, Tim!"

"Gone?" he echoed. And then his reaction shocked her. He laughed. "Well, Jean always said she was never cut out for ranch life. Where'd she run off to, Linda?"

SHE told him as briefly as possible how, shortly after Tim had signed up with the Rebel army, her sister met and fell in love with a drummer and ran away with him. She was living in a big coastal city, now, she told Tim and they only heard from her every once in awhile but she seemed to be happy.

He turned toward her, his laughing eyes solemn now. "But I—I don't understand," he said, looking bewildered. "The letters I've been getting from her? They—"

"Jean never wrote to you even once, Tim," she put in quickly. She had to turn away from him. She couldn't look at him as she told him this: "*I* wrote to you, Tim, and signed Jean's name, pretending it was Jean who was writing, from the very beginning." Color swept up in a warm tide that burned her throat and face, as she remembered some of the things she had written over Jean's signature.

"It was the wrong thing to do, I realize now," she said miserably. "But once I started I couldn't seem to stop. The way you answered—those letters meant so much to you. Especially toward the end, when the fighting was going so bad against our boys. And when you were wounded and had to spend those long months in the hospital, Tim—I— Well, I just *couldn't* tell you, then. I thought the shook of hearing the truth might be too much for you."

Linda suddenly turned around and

COW BUNNY NOW

Spirited Novelette of Two Kinds of Siren

By Art Lawson

here, this one up on the high rim of the canyon, could not possibly be the same one who had gone to the lonesome funeral when ma was put away.

The month had completely changed Sally, like the time spent in a chrysalis will change a worm into a butterfly. But with Sally, the process had been completely reversed.

"Triple shucks," she said with considerable steam. . . .

Her downfall had started when she

wrote to Uncle Jim Barka to tell him that his sister-in-law had died. Uncle Jim had not written back. The answer had been signed by Sally's two cousins.

Yu kin com liv with us kiddo. Got plenty room, lotsa fellers and fun. River out front. Rite on mane rode from Texas to Mexico.
Lov from us all.
Linda and Paloma

Sally thought they were joking, writing like that! My goodness, a kid in the third grade could spell better. Maybe it was because ma's only sister had run away with that wild Mexican, Uncle Jim, and the girls had learned more Spanish than English.

But Sally shrugged it off, and when a second letter came, she answered it right way. Her funds were running low, and she would love to visit her cousins while casting around for something to do, anything to keep out of a cotton mill in Lawrence or Lowell.

Train and river boat and stage unrolled the endless scenes of America. Sally was appalled at the size of the country. But the vision sustained her: Her cousins, they would be about her age, dark and sultry, maybe, with big hearts and welcome arms.

This ranch on the river, Sally embellished the picture in her mind as she rode along. Willows would shade the river as they shaded the upper Charles near Boston; the mountains would be green and rolling like old Graylock in the Berkshires; and the ranch, itself, was made up of pens that the Westerners called corrals, nice white, one-story houses, beautiful horses and fat cows.

That would be like living in dreamland.

There were more stage coaches hauled by six scawny horses and tooled by blasphemous drivers. Across the great Staked Plains of Texas they rolled, stopping at "forts," ranches," or "stations," all of which looked alike to Sally. They headed south, the occupants of the stage changing day by day.

They came to another station. Next stop was Uncle Jim's.

"Kinda off your trail, sister?" a man asked her.

Early in the morning, the sky was already ablaze, promising another furnace of a day. But Sally figured she could stand it, especially with a river at the end. And it was something she would get used to, anyway, she reasoned, like these men who would always speak up without an introduction. Before she had learned it was the custom of the country, she had been offended with these rough-hewn gentlemen who were always ready to talk.

"Nope," she said to him. "Reckon I'm not." "Reckon" was a word she had learned on her way west. Back home it would have been "cal'clate." She pointed to the south. "My uncle's got a big ranch down there on a river. I'm going to stay with him and my cousins."

The man's eyes narrowed with sudden strangeness. There was something about his mouth that made Sally think he was trying to keep from laughing.

"That being the case I reckon you and I'll be seein' somewhat of each other. I'm Homer Burgess."

The name meant nothing at all to her, but she put out a small hand to shake with him. "I'm Sally McHugh," she introduced herself. "I'm sure you'll be welcome."

He seemed to be stifling his laughter again. "I never seen a welcome mat out at Jim Barka's—but I sure do aim to drop in once you get settled. Your permission, of course."

"My cousins said there were lots of gentlemen and fun around the ranch," Sally said.

"There are at that!" Homer Burgess admitted.

The stage driver hollered down from his high seat. "Let go of the lady, Homer. It's time we were rolling."

Homer Burgess, who had been holding her hand all this time, turned it palm upward, and kissed it. Astonished, Sally blushed. But Homer was deft. He handed her into the stage before she could really take offense. He closed the door and grinned in at her.

The driver snapped his whip and blasphemed the ancestry of his broomtail horses. They banged into their collars. The coach shot out onto the road and Mr. Burgess's handsome face disappeared in the dust. Alone in the coach, except for a couple of army wives traveling to the border where their husbands were sta-

tioned, Sally spread a small, unconscious smile across her lovely features.

That Homer was brash, but he was handsome! It was kind of nice knowing you would have a gentleman visitor in your new home.

THE coach clattered, banged and smashed its way through the hottest and dustiest day Sally could remember. When she thought she could stand no more of it, the lumbering vehicle ducked down into a stony ravine, the pace increased, the language of the driver became more incomprehensible.

His horses, it seemed, were related to sidewinders, chuckwallas, tarantulas, and all sorts of creatures that Sally had never heard of. They were spavined, hammock-backed, knock-kneed. They were crow-bait and buzzard meat.

It seemed a miracle to Sally that such animals could pull a coach. But pull it they did. As the sun was setting in a great crimson ball, they clattered up to a dingy row of shacks that looked about ready to collapse into the endless, bitter, alkaline sand.

Two very lovely girls dressed in tatters and rags rushed out to greet the coach. They had great, lustrous dark eyes and the glossiest black hair Sally had ever seen. Both were full-breasted, sleek-hipped, and barefooted. Such strange, wild creatures, Sally thought! Someday, after she was well ensconced in her uncle's rancho, she would come up to see these girls.

They were calling something that sounded strangely like "Sally." Only, the way they called it one would have thought it was two words: Sal—Lee.

The stage driver also called down to her. "Well, here it is!"

"Here's what?" Sally wanted to know.

With unexpected gallantry, the driver hopped down and opened the door.

"Smuggler's Ranch, lady," he said. "End of your trip."

Sally thought the man must have made a mistake. The fine dream-river was a sheet of blazing blood in the sunset, trickling down between mile-wide sand-banks. The great trees she had imagined were only scrawney, thorny things that looked as if they had died half a dozen times. Gingerly she stepped down from the coach with the two army women following.

Sally was immediately surrounded by those two lovely girls. They threw their arms around her and kissed her wildly.

"Sal—Lee."

"Cousin!"

They were overwhelming. They rushed her up to the gray line of shanties and into the biggest of them. Behind a sort of bar, a huge man stood. He was completely bald, and his mustaches reminded Sally of horsetails. He wore nothing but a pair of once-white pants. Down the middle of his chest a rattlesnake had been tattooed. He terrified her.

"These," one of the girls said, "is papa. Your onkle Jeem. These, papa, she ees Sally."

Sally thought it was a preposterous joke. But the huge, strange man bowed to her.

"Yes, I see. Sally. You are named of my wife." He crossed himself. "Alas, but she is gone." His smile was strangely softening. "When a girl, she looked like you, Sally. We were very happy here."

Sally could not believe it. But this man's humility, whether he was her Uncle Jim or not, warmed her to him. She put out her hand to shake with him, terrified that he might feel it necessary to give her an unclish kiss. He spared her that.

"We're all glad to have you here," he said. "The girls have been looking forward to their little cousin."

The stage driver appeared at the door of this horrible shanty.

"Hiyah, Jim. Hello, girls. Where in hell do you want them boxes, lady?" he asked.

Sally was paralyzed. But one of the girls took charge.

"You, Billy Bridges," she shouted. "You talk right. These ees our cousin from Boston. The boxes—?" She cocked a gorgeous eye at Sally.

"My trunks," Sally explained.

"Ah!" Both the girls knew where to take the trunks. They rushed Sally out into the glaring sunset, into an adjoining shack. There was her room. The bed was made of poles and rope with a hay-filled ticking for mattress. The other

furniture consisted of two boxes, one a dynamite box for a chair, the other a dry-goods crate for a table or dresser.

"Thees ees your room," one of the girls said. "Me, I am Linda. She, she ees Paloma."

Paloma asked: "What's in those trunks?"

Sally never got a chance to answer. They had the trunks open in a moment. Seconds later they had both stripped down and were trying on her dresses. Sally did not know it then, but she was about to be robbed of everything she owned. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Leave Her Breathless

SALLY'S initial mistake was in giving each of her cousins a dress. Both girls did things to those dresses that Sally never could have done. They filled them out smoothly, sleekly, and that evening they got such glances from the stage driver and others as they had never gotten before. In this land of few women, the girls were accustomed to attention of all sorts from men. But they never before got whistles and sighs.

Nobody noticed Sally, and after that she was lost. Her cousins helped themselves to everything in the trunks but Sally's shoes. Having gone barefooted all their lives, they could not squeeze into Sally's dainty slippers. The cousins were broken-hearted.

Sally made her second mistake right on top of the first. Being a girl who had been brought up properly, she offered to help with the dishes. Within a week she was doing them all. Within two weeks, she was doing the cooking as well. The cousins, Linda and Paloma, were entirely too busy sporting their new finery to help around the big, old kitchen.

On one of his trips south, the stage driver cornered Sally in the kitchen. Billy Bridges was a short, husky man who preferred the bottle to the girl. Sally was reduced to a little calico skirt and blouse. Billy Bridges had guessed what had happened.

"Homer Burgess been askin' for you," he said. "You want to pull out of this dump, I'll take you. He'll be pleased."

At the mention of the handsome Burgess, Sally's heart gave a thump. She was exhausted. As usual on stage days, she had twice as much work to do and only half as much help. Paloma and Linda were busy looking over the current crop of passengers.

"No," she said.

Billy suggested: "Think it over. I'll be back, goin' north, in a week or ten days. Think it over."

"Thanks," she said. "You're sweet."

She still had some money, so she need not be dependent on Homer Burgess, whom she had met for only a moment. She had also found a stray burro in the hills, a friendly little donkey she had named Black Beauty. On him she could make her get-away.

But something held Sally here that she could not quite understand. It was pride, mostly. She was taking a licking; and running out would not do. She had to fight back. Time would tell her how.

Meanwhile, whenever she could, she sneaked off with Black Beauty into the hills. She liked especially the Comanche Spur, an arrow-shaped chunk of rimrock that stuck out over the Smoky River. From up there she could see clear down into Mexico. The river crossing was like a miniature relief map below her—and even the squalid shanties of her uncle's horrible rancho looked like romantic little model houses.

However, her chief interest in this spot was the secret pool she had found below the rimrock, where Comanche Creek cut around the spur before tumbling in a spectacular fall down to the river's edge. Here, in this cove, was the only part of her dream that had come true. She could lie in the sun or skulk in the shade, or float around in the lazy pool with its equally lazy fish. But even here she could not forget her troubles.

It was on one of these trips up to the spur that she took to cussing. "Shucks," she said, "and double shucks."

She looked down on the river below, a sheet of molten silver in the sandbanks that constantly shifted back and forth in the wind, looking like smoke blowing downstream. She thought of her cousin's letter.

"Rite on the mane rode from Texas to Mexico." Her chest swelled with mortification, and her heart twisted with the futility of it all. She said out loud: "Right on the main road to Hell. That's it!"

A man laughed. "I never heard it better said, sonny."

Sally jumped to her feet in terror, her blue eyes as round as cinch irons. The man cleared his throat.

"Pardon me, sister," he said piously. "I ain't used to hearing ladies cuss—or to seein' them wearing pants. That hat fooled me. All I could see from up here was the hat and your feet."

Then the man grinned down on her.

She said bitterly: "I'm lucky to even have my feet left, mister. As for the pants, they're my uncle's, cut down to fit. So's the shirt. My cousins got away with all the rest of my clothes."

The man said: "I can't imagine you in a lovelier outfit." Then he thrust out a big, rope-scarred fist. "Pleased to meet you, miss." His voice was deep, with a lilt of song to it. Sally trembled. Her heart was still kicking around from the surprise, shaking her small body down to her bare toes. "The name is Pryor. Slim Pryor," the man went on. "Dealer in cattle."

Sally took his hand. It engulfed hers. She began to blush. "I guess I'm only Sally McHugh," she said.

"Don't you know?" He laughed. "You gotta guess who you are?"

She nodded, then shook her head, and the curls of molten gold danced under the ragged straw sombrero.

"No," she said. "I don't know who I am any more. And you, mister, you're lying!"

IF ANYTHING, Slim Pryor's grin widened. Like Homer Burgess, Slim had a rugged handsomeness. But he was taller than Homer, and more finely made. His breathlessly wide shoulders were straight as a plank.

"So I'm somebody else?" he asked.

"You're no cattle buyer," she said. "We're two miles off the road here, and ten miles from a cow. Besides—" she cocked a pair of blue eyes at him— "all the smugglers say they're cattle buyers."

"Smugglers?" You'd think he had never heard of the word.

"Of course!" she said. She turned her back on him and lifted a hand to point to the south. The man looked over her shoulder in the direction of Mexico. This was so clear a day one could see for up to fifty miles.

"Yonder! See that pass? That's the *Sierra Sangrienta.* Bloody Mountain. That pass—it's *Paso de Contrabandista.* Smuggler's Notch."

She had translated before she realized how she had done it.

"Smuggler's Notch?" the man said.

She laughed shortly. "Funny. There's a Smuggler's Notch up in New Hampshire. We used to go there for vacations when mother and father were still alive. It doesn't seem real . . . now."

He said: "My gosh! A Yankee!"

"Why not?" she countered. "The world's full of Yankees."

"The world ain't full of Yankees like you," he said. She did not know how he had done it, but he had managed to put an arm half way around her. She was facing him; his hand was on her waist where the rope she used as a belt held up her pants.

With his other hand, he tipped back her sombrero. As more curls tumbled out, he took the hat off her head and tossed it on the ground. He tousled her hair. "Plain gorgeous."

Never in all her life had anybody treated Sally like this. She did not know whether to be amused or outraged. She was left completely speechless.

"There ain't another pair of eyes like those anywhere," he went on, cataloging her. "I bet not even in New Hampshire. And that nose, well, it ain't much, but what there is of it is mighty cute. That mouth—" He looked like a man about to take a bite of his favorite food after a week's starvation. Then he frowned. "What happened to that luscious mouth? It ain't smiled in ages."

Sally found her voice. She dropped her hand onto his hand that held her waist. But she did not move his hand away—not just yet.

"What happened to your brass?" she asked him. "You just get in a brand new supply?"

Slim Pryor roared with laughter. His eyes narrowed. They seemed to center on her chin for a moment, a nice little determined chin that had taken too much of a beating lately, and then swept down, along the line of her throat, down the buttons of her battered shirt, down to the patch on her knee, and then to her bare feet. She wriggled her toes as a blush grew up to the roots of her hair. She lifted his hand from around her waist. He looked terribly sad.

Her hipbone tingled queerly. She knew that her lips were trembling as blood flooded them in a rushing surge of pulse-beat. She still held the hand she had removed from her waist and there seemed to be no way of letting go of it. He did not help any.

No man she had ever met before had affected her like this. Homer Burgess was forgotten. The boys of Boston might as well never have existed. This hombre held her like a magnet.

"Always had a dream," he said finally, "of coming across a child of nature—a wildling—a really beautiful girl with her feet on the ground instead of her hand in my bank account. With a girl like the girl I dreamed of, I could live in a cave and sing all day. We could make our own Eden."

She knew that her mouth was open and that she was on her toes, leaning toward him, and somehow it seemed perfectly proper that this should be so. In another minute she would start panting. He shook his head as if the dream eluded him. Then his eyes became quite sharp and direct. "You don't have a big sister living with you in that cave, do you?"

Sally was furious. She drew herself up to her full five-foot-two. She was not very big, maybe, but like her nose, what there was of her was mighty nice. She was not so lush as her two cousins, maybe, but a man would have a mighty long ride—and back again—before he'd find anybody with such a pert figure as Sally's. Standing on her toes, with her breath taut, even this man must see.

"First of all," she said sharply, "you call me a boy. Then you want to know if I have a big sister, just like I wasn't big enough. Well—I'll have you know, mister, I'm twenty years old, I don't live in a cave, I don't have a sister, I don't want to see you again, and if you're looking for females to live in your paradise, why don't you try my cousins? They could stand a lot of taming. Good-by."

The man whistled in awe. She picked up her sombrero and clamped it down on her golden head. He put a hand on her bare arm.

"I didn't mean—"

She slapped his hand hard. "I did!"

He took hold of the rope belt where the knot was tied and yanked her up to him with an arm that snapped like a bear trap.

"What you need is a little taming, yourself," he said between his teeth.

Then he took a handful of her hair, tipped her head back, and kissed her full on the mouth. There was no love lost in that kiss. It was plain violence, bruising, searing, and it melted her up like a toy soldier thrown into a furnace. Then he left her there.

"Those cousins sound like they were worth trying," he said, and he strode away.

CHAPTER THREE

Drowned!

SALLY reckoned she had about come to the end of her rope. Everything went wrong these days. She could not even be surprised by a man in the woods without being paid off in trouble. Well, nobody was going to leave Sally flat. Finally she ambled down the trail to the spot where she had left Black Beauty.

That jackass was usually better than a watchdog about warning of visitors. That he had not said a word today puzzled her—until she got a chance to look over the grounds where Black Beauty had been tethered.

This gentleman, this Slim Pryor who claimed to be a cattle-buyer had come up with a horse and two burros, she discovered by studying the ground around Black Beauty. Very coy, her own donkey waved his huge rabbit-like ears and rolled his eyes at her. Undoubtedly one or both of Slim's burros were Jennies. Sally could

picture them rubbing their noses with Black Beauty.

And then Sally's donkey remembered his duty as a watchdog. He let go with a horrendous blast, pointing his nose to the sky and braying as if in agony. Sally slapped him good and hard until he shut up. Then she flung a leg over his back, hooked her bare toes into his shaggy hair, and slapped again.

"Git!"

Black Beauty ambled off. He had been up this trail so often he knew his way as well as Sally did. He knew that on a day as hot as this his mistress usually took a dip in the pool where the creek made its sharp turn to form the spur, so he stopped in his accustomed space, snuffing at the cool mist that rose from the falls.

Kicking him very hard did not make him move on again. Black Beauty was determined that Sally should take her accustomed swim and lie in the sun afterwards to dry off.

And why not? Sally thought. She had lost everything, her pretty clothes and independence—even her way with men. But nobody could take from her the simple pleasure of warm sun on her back, the cool caress of water, or the tingling thrill of a dive from a high rock. Not even the hombre who had surprised her in the grass could do that!

So Sally slid off the burro and climbed the highest rock at the back of her swimming pool. Then she tossed the sombrero onto a bush. At that instant Black Beauty gave with a terrific braying. Startled, Sally almost fell off the ledge. Her glance followed his snout and she realized that she was being watched.

A devilish humor struck her. She would give that spy a good scare.

Poised on her toes on the edge of the ledge, she dove. There was the thrilling moment of free flight, then the sudden rush of the water as she entered it cleanly. Silvery bubbles surrounded her; the little fishes scooted away.

Sally went down as deep as she could, giving herself to the fast current and letting it sweep her away. It took her down and around, whirling past the bend and through the chute. There it washed her up on a flat rock.

Quickly she clambered out, found a place in the sun between two ledges where she would be out of sight, and stretched out in the warm crease. Her pulse beat against the hard stone. She tried to muffle her breath. Her chest was full of laughter.

"Sally!" The man's voice was scared. Sally stifled a giggle. "Sally! Hey—where are you?"

She huddled closer to the rock. Give him a good jolt. It would serve him right for the shabby way he had treated her.

She heard him scrambling around and calling; and she ignored him. Then, after a while, there was silence. . . . Sally did not know how long it lasted because, suddenly, she was shivering, cold, and her teeth were chattering. In the warm nook she had fallen asleep until the sun went down and the rocks started to cool. Off to the west, the sun shot great jagged sheets of flame into the sky. To the east, the gray of night was rolling in. She must have slept for three hours or more.

Clambering over the rocks, Sally called to her burro.

"Black Beauty—Black Beauty."

The donkey was gone. The way to the ranch was rocky—a good two miles—and Sally was barefooted. Her practical joke had backfired. Just one more swift kick in the pants for Sally McHugh. Doggedly she headed for home . . .

PHILOSOPHICALLY, Sally soaked her feet in the horse trough beside the stack of rubbish that once had been the stables of Smuggler's Ranch. Her cousins often told her what a wonderful place this had been when the stage lines ran a regular daily schedule, before a railroad further north ruined the business.

In those days the old forts had to be kept up, and handsome officers and enlisted men filled the ranch with their song. There had always been two or three dozen horses in the stables and corrals, with half-a-dozen Mexicans to tend them.

Now there was nothing but the wrecked remnants of the place, no Mexican stable boys, only the horse trough and the memories. Sometimes two or three weeks passed between stage runs because the driver would not leave either end of his

route unless he had a full load to carry.

On her fingers Sally counted the days since Billy Bridges had last driven the stage south, after offering to help her get away on the return trip. But for the life of her she could not decide—eight . . . nine . . . ten? The days were all alike here in this dismal place.

Men's voices roused her. She pulled her feet out of the trough and trotted away to the little shanty where she stabled Black Beauty. Crouching close to the wall, she could hear the burro chomping away on some oats somebody had given him. Black Beauty ground his grain with a sound quite different from that of chewing hay, and he grunted as he ate. She knew that the oats would make him frisky tonight.

She could hear the men, too, walking through the darkness, coming toward her. One of them was swearing softly and constantly, not with bitterness but with a feeling of loss.

"Drowned!" He was close to crying. "Here I am thinkin' of askin' her would she run off and marry me instead of Homer, and she gets drowned."

It was Billy Bridges staggering along. Billy always got drunk on the nights he stayed at the rancho.

Billy wailed some more: "Here I am in the prime of life and fixin' to marry up with that good ol' Sally gal, and she gets drowned. It's been one hell of a day, pardner. Broke a wheel on the Concord—got held up—and Sally drowns herself."

Billy's companion helped Billy on the way and soon they were out of hearing. They had gone down to the river to douse their heads, most likely. The pop-skull whiskey that Uncle Jim stewed in his old iron still, made from the boiler of an ancient donkey engine, affected men in strange ways.

Sally remembered a drummer who had taken on a load of Uncle Jim's rot-gut and had thereupon given Black Beauty a long sales talk on the merit of his goods. The drummer had been pretty convincing, according to the next morning evidence, when the burro showed up decked in bracelets and trinkets.

Now the burro began to bray in his flimsy shanty. Like the sun popping out from behind a cloud, Sally got the significence of Billy Bridge's loud sorrow.

She had been drowned. Sally no longer exsited! As far as anyone knew, she was dead and gone. Slim Pryor had seen her jump into the river—and nobody had seen her come out.

She flung her arms wide and danced lithely through the night, oblivious of her aching feet . . .

Some of the Indian tribes "bury" their dead on a platform in a tree and supply the corpses with all sorts of delicacies, the best of jerked beef, pemmican, dried tobacco root, and so on, to see the deceased across the Great Divide. When the dead could not be found, such as those lost in battle behind the enemy's lines, or those who were drowned or eaten by wolves, some of these Indians would put out a bow and arrow as well as suitable provisions in a convenient place where the ghost of the deceased could find them.

Unfortunately this was not a custom of Uncle Jim Barka's clan—and Sally very much resented it. After her day in the country and her hike home, she was starved.

She turned over in her mind the various sources of supply. These were almost always slim. Uncle Jim and his luscious daughters seldom thought of tomorrow. If there was no meat to be found in the cooler, they would load up their guns and go hunting. The wilderness was full of antelope.

The buffalo were gone, but prong-horns could still be driven into the sands of Smoky River to be butchered there. If you were really hungry for meat, you could take a shotgun and go after the jackrabbits that bounced up and down all over the place. Seldom, though, were they reduced to this. The river was full of catfish. Horrible-looking, but delicious.

Catfish, Sally decided, was exactly what she desired at the moment. Furthermore it was probably the only dish she could expect to eat if she wanted to remain in this wonderful state of being drowned.

A good meal, she thought, would give her the stamina to steal Slim Pryor's horse, which was out on a picket pin in the high grass where chickens once had been kept. Pull the pin so they would think he had run away—and git.

This was Sallys golden opportunity.

Nobody was watching. She was free. In the house her two cousins were squabbling over who should cook the evening meal. Since they had made Sally their slave, Linda and Paloma had forgotten how to get around in the kitchen.

They were having considerable trouble, and the more it piled up the better Sally liked it. Uncle Jim, too, discovered that there was work to do. Men in the barroom shouted for drinks. Uncle Jim, who had also let Sally wait on him for many a day, had to heave his hulk up and go fetch.

There were great advantages to being "dead," Sally thought—as long as she could peek through a window or two and see the effect it was having on the people who had taken advantage of her good nature.

UNCLE Jim spilled the tears as he turned the spigot on his keg of rot-gut. "Datter of my wife's favorite sister!" he moaned. "We give her a home. But she don't have no gratitude. Jumps in the river and drowns herself."

He was wonderfully dramatic, but it did not cause Sally to burst into tears. Everybody was offended with her for drowning. The act had affronted them. But none of her observations eased the churnings in her stomach. Even the food that her cousins were burning sent out fumes that made Sally hungrier than ever. There was a fishpole in Black Beauty's shanty. She would fetch it.

Silently she crept across the yard. Her burro snuffed suspiciously. There was a rustling in the darkness—and a man's arms were flung around her. Before she could squeal or squeak or put up a fight, he had her tight in his embrace. He kissed her behind the ear. Searching for her mouth in this pitch-black shack, his lips slid across her cheek. She ducked her head.

He said into her hair: "Been waitin' a hundred years for you, honey. Thought you'd never come." He sighed a sigh as deep as an artesian well and kissed her on the outside corner of her right eye. "Dove!" he gasped.

Nothing like this had ever happened to Sally McHugh. She had even quit dreaming about the possibility since arriving in the Smoky River country. After all the unhappiness, it was like being shown the entrance to Paradise. Sally sought to make the most of it. She let her soft, young, lissome body sway against his broad chest,

"More," she sighed.

He gave her more. His mouth moved down onto Sally's, and his hands gripped her back as if they were a pair of powerful vises. He was a lot rougher than she had expected he would be—and he smelled different. Slim Pryor had smelled like prime ribs of beef roasted rare over charcoal. But the man who was kissing her now smelled like a horse.

When she had to finally breathe or suffocate, she twisted her face away. "Lookit," she gasped. "Gimme a chance to get my wind."

He said: "Honey—honey!" His big voice soothed her. "You sure you want to go through with this, Dove?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

He pulled her close again and said: "I got the stuff from Billy Bridges this time. How about another kiss?"

"Sure," she agreed. "Just remember you can't have your cake and eat it too. Gimme that kiss, but no bruises."

"You're funnier than a cross-eyed chuckwalla trying to catch a fly," he said. "But you never were as funny as this."

"It's from being drowned," she said. "It sort of lets a girl loose."

The man stiffened. For a moment the pressure of his arms was less personal. She could hear the throbbing of his heart ease. Then his lips dropped on hers, and she wondered what had happened to the fire of his embrace. He was doing some calculating, she reasoned, and she clung to him more fervently to rekindle that elusive blaze.

He lifted his head, and though she could not see even a shadow of him, she knew that he was looking directly down into her eyes.

"What's this about being drowned?" he asked.

For the first time, Sally began to suspect that she had been kissed by mistake. She played the rest of the game close.

"Sally," she said. "She went swimming in that pool up Comanche Spur.

She dove in and never came out again."

"A hell of a note," he said. "She was one cute chick, that Sally. But not cute like you, Dove. I only seen her that once, and I marked her down for keeps. Strictly from Boston. Born in a refrigerator. No flavor. That was Sally."

Sally was outraged: "You sound like you'd been kissing her, too!"

"I'd just as soon cut my throat with a dull knife as kiss with that Sally," the man chuckled. "Pucker up, Dove, and let's get to work."

"Dove," Sally realized a little late was the English for *Paloma.* This hombre had been under the impression he had been kissing her cousin. Let him fool himself if he wanted to, she thought. She ruffled her back hairs and laughed softly at him.

"I'm puckered," she said. "And waiting."

"You're sure actin' strange," he said. She could almost feel his forehead furrowed with puzzlement.

" 'Course not," Sally said. And she took a big gamble. The man's voice was unfamiliar to her, so she reasoned he could not have been around lately. "You been away a long time."

That melted him. He fumbled around a moment. "There's a government man somewhere in the woods," he informed her. "Just in case he jumps me, keep this, Dove, until I cash his chips for him. Then we'll light out for the big city—"

Something small, but very heavy, dropped into the pocket of her shirt. She gasped, feeling this weight nestling against her. The man ran his hand through her hair. He was moving in for another kiss.

"What you been doin', pigeon," he asked. "Curling your hair?"

"Sure," Sally said. "I figured maybe you'd like me better with curls."

"This I gotta see," he said.

Quickly, Sally said: "They'll be wonderin' where I am. I gotta be getting back inside."

She ducked out from under his arm and fled. She got through the door, past the watering trough, and into the brush. He ran after her. She scooted around the house, banged a door as if she had gone inside, and lay up close to the crumbled foundation.

The man took her bait. Backing away, he was a silhouette against the starry sky. He seemed to be listening. Then, without a word, he turned away and walked straight up the trail, headed north.

Sally wondered who he could be. One of Paloma's many admirers, was all she knew, and one who had been away for quite a while.

Could he have been Slim Pryor after all . . .?

CHAPTER FOUR

Contraband Kisses

A GIRL of less curiosity would have dropped the mystery there. She would have stolen Slim's horse and hightailed for more civilized country. But Sally, who had suffered so much unhappiness down here on her uncle's ranch, simply had to know who it was who had kissed her.

Besides, she was hungry. Maybe a poet can live on kisses. But not Sally—who had a fine appetite for eating-vittles. So she gave up the notion of going fishing and crept back toward the house. She scouted the kitchen, found it empty and dark, and crawled inside.

There was something strange about the room, and it took Sally several seconds to figure out what it was. The place was in a mess. The dishes had not been done, and the stove was already cold. Sally, brought up in a strict New England home, had always tidied up after supper. Her cousins had left the room in a shambles. Sally grimly went about her foraging.

She was hampered by the fact that the door to the adjoining barroom was wide open and sent a shaft of smoky light into the kitchen, as if searching for her. This barroom was long and wide and it served many purposes. In this wild, unpopulated country, cattlemen came from miles around to do their business in the Barka ranchhouse. They drank Uncle Jim's foul whiskey, ate the delicious meals his niece, Sally, prepared, and slept on the floor of the big common room.

Outlaws made their plans here. Travellers took the chance of being knifed in their sleep. And smugglers carried on

their nefarious business around the moth-eaten billiard table at the south end of the room. The evenings were often riotous . . . but tonight there was no singing in the Barka parlor.

Billy Bridges cried into his beer. Slim Pryor seemed to be studying the bottom of a glass—with time out on occasion to observe whichever Barka girl was flitting by with a flirtatious swagger. Ned Stewart was there, a rancher from up the river. All were glum. After a very bad meal of half-cooked catfish and burned beans, none felt like singing or dancing, or even smiling. Then, too, there was the tragedy to dampen high spirits.

Slim Pryor had the floor when Sally crept into the kitchen. She could hear him plainly.

"I'm telling you, Billy, I didn't push her off that there rock. She fell off. I mean, she jumped off. I wasn't chasin' her, either. I never seen her before. She said to me if I was looking for females to live in Paradise with me, why didn't I try her cousins. So I said okay. I lost my way. Next I knew she dove into the river and never came up. Hell—I didn't know her. I thought she was some kid who'd wandered away from her mammy and was lost."

"Brother!" Billy wheezed. "She's some kid. I mean *some*. I mean she was."

Linda Barka said: "My goodness. If Sally went and drowned herself, what can we do about it?"

Uncle Jim said, "The drinks are on the house."

Paloma cried: "Cousin Sally was my bes' friend."

Paloma was the prettiest of the sisters. Both were dark after their father's family, with black straight hair that they kept oiled and shining. Their hair was their greatest delight, and they brushed it an hour a day. Their olive skin and opulent build were in contrast to their Yankee cousin. Though they were obviously sisters, Paloma's features were finer than Linda's. She could make a pout of her full lips and put an angle on her stance that would cause any man to forget his home and fireside.

"I loved Cousin Salleeee!" she wailed.

In the half-dark kitchen, gobbling the under-cooked food and trying to keep out of sight, Sally made a note of that conversation. The longer she remained drowned the better it was—and the more she knew about herself.

Slim Pryor added to her store of knowledge. "Bring me another cup of that liquid dynamite, Jim," he said. "Only thing I ever seen that could beat your home brew was your niece. It sure is a shame she jumped into that river. But I gotta admit that was a mighty good piece of advice she gave me before she done herself in."

He did not mention what her advice had been. The rest of the party waited respectfully for him to tell what she had said. Hiding in the kitchen, Sally waited, too, and looked them all over. Why Slim should praise her now that she was "gone" beat Sally. Everyone knew she was practically invisible beside her gorgeous cousins.

Linda and Paloma were wild as mink. Their mother had died when they were only knee-high to Black Beauty, and they had grown up like kittens with no help from their pappy. But Sally thought they looked rather silly in the clothing they had stolen from her. Everything was too tight. Only the careful handwork of Sally's mother kept the seams from bursting.

Sally silently scraped the bottom of the pot of half-cooked beans.

"Wha' she say?" Billy Bridges finally asked. "Wha's this good advice?"

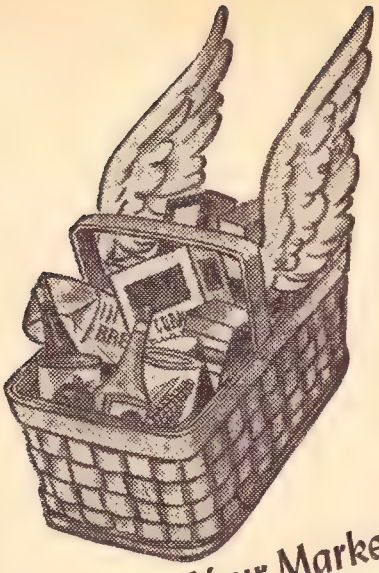
Pryor grinned broadly, then frowned. "Where's that drink, Jim?"

Jim rushed up to him. Slim Pryor swirled the liquor around in the mug. Sally had broken all the glasses to show her resentment of being made a slavey, and they were down to tinware.

"You say something?" Slim asked Billy Bridges.

"She give you some good advice," Billy said. "The only advice she ever give me was to cut my throat. But I didn't figger I was ready to at the time."

They roared. When they had quieted a little, Slim Pryor said: "Like I said. She told me if I was looking for females to live in Paradise with me, I might try her cousins." Linda and Paloma promptly preened themselves. "And I might at that, if they ain't spoken for," he added.



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"But first of all I gotta get a glass of water. This here red-eye is burning a hole through my stomach."

"I'll get it for you," Linda promptly offered.

"Thanks," Slim said. "I'd sure appreciate it." He got up and walked right into the kitchen, with Linda scooting along beside him.

Sally could not get away without being seen. She crouched behind the big, wood-burning stove. Her cousins had not kept the fire up for dishwater after cooking supper, so, though her hide-out was plenty hot, it was not impossible. For once in her life Sally was pleased that she was a half-pint. Neither of her big, gorgeous cousins could have hidden out here.

LINDA and Slim took a long time walking across the kitchen to the sink where the pitcher pump stood. To Sally in her hang-out, they seemed glued together. Deftly Linda worked Slim out of the patch of light from the barroom. Her hand was on his arm, her side brushed his.

"You mean that, Sleem?" she asked.

"Porque no?" he said. "Why not?"

"Ah— Sleem!"

Sally felt ill. *"Sleem!"* She almost said it out loud.

They stopped by the sink. Linda was being very coy.

"Our cousin break all our glasses, Sleem," she told him. "I guess she don't like to wash deeshes. Here a cup without a handle. You pomp and I hold the cup."

Dutifully Slim worked the handle. Water spurted from the lip of the pitcher pump. The cup overflowed and Linda was splashed. She squealed prettily.

"You get me all wet, Sleem!"

For Sally's money, Linda had been all wet right along. Gallantly Slim dried off Linda's hand with a damp dish towel. She gave him the cup and he drank the cool water.

"You weesh anothair?" Linda had out her thickest accent tonight.

But Slim did not appear to notice. Though, to Sally, he was hardly more than a silhouette against the window over the sink, she could somehow sense that

the glass of water was his excuse, not his reason for coming out here. Sally's suspicious mind suggested that his reason might well be Linda, because, when he set down the cup, he put an arm around Linda's soft waist.

Linda promptly cuddled up to him. Her fine teeth shone in the reflected light from the front room. She purred like a cat.

"You like me maybe better than Paloma?"

"Sure do," he said.

Sally could have thrown a piece of firewood at him.

"You glad I come out to find your cup?" Linda asked.

"Never was gladder in my life," Slim whispered. He turned her about so her face was smiling up to his. "Those eyes! There ain't another pair of eyes like those anywhere. That luscious mouth . . ."

Sally was completely disgusted. Not long ago he had been saying exactly the same thing to her. Sally began to burn. Linda caressed his shoulder with a dimpled chin and smiled sweetly with a soft mouth. Her breathing was a series of sweet sighs.

Behind the stove, Sally's temperature went up another couple of degrees. She hardly heard the rattle of hoofs down the road. Nobody else paid any attention to Linda and Slim. In the barroom they were all busy with their own problems.

Paloma had tried to sneak out the front door and her father had ordered her back inside. The hoofbeats came to a dramatic halt in the yard. Gear creaked. The rotten boardwalk crumpled under cowboy heels. The front door banged.

"Evenin' folks," a voice said brightly.

It was the voice of the man who had kissed Sally out in the shed. Sally gasped. She stuck her head out from behind the stove to get a look. The man was the one who had kissed her hand on the day she arrived here. What was his name? Burgess—Homer Burgess.

For the first time since he had dropped it down her pocket, Sally began to wonder what the small, heavy object was. But now was no time to take a look at it. Something had happened to Homer Burgess.

He glared ferociously at Paloma.

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"What you done to your hair?" Homer snapped.

Paloma put a dainty hand to her raven locks. She had done nothing to her hair that she had not always done. The braids were sleek and rich. The filligree of the silver comb that Paloma always wore shone dully. Slowly Homer's glance moved down, past the great pools of the girl's adoring eyes. Sally's cousin began to look frightened.

Sally reached into her pocket to fumble with the object he had given her by mistake. It was a small, leather sack, like the "pokes" miners used to use for carrying their gold dust. It seemed to be full of rocks, not of nuggets. Sally's face broke into an unaccustomed smile.

In the darkness of the kitchen, Linda snuggled up to Slim Pryor.

"I must tell him. My leetle sister, she is to meet him in the house of the burro. But I forgot to tell her."

"Just a second!" Slim said tensely.

Behind the stove, Sally decided the time had come to break up the party. There was a sack of onions nearby, and she reached for one. Swiftly she rolled it across the floor toward Linda. It sounded exactly like a mouse in a hurry.

Linda screamed—and clambered up Slim Pryor. Homer Burgess moved fast as a snake. He was across the barroom and up to the kitchen door with a six-shooter in his hand. He scowled into the darkness.

"Come on out—hands up!"

Sally got up creekily from her confined hide-out. She walked slowly toward Homer, trying to undulate in the manner of her cousins.

"Remember me, Homer?" she asked archly.

Homer did not recognize her at first. Then he got it. "Curls!" He glowered.

"Just for you," she mocked.

HOMER stepped quickly into the dark room. His gun was only inches from Sally. In the barroom, Sally's appearance was causing all sorts of reactions. Paloma began to weep.

Homer hissed. "Where's that ice?"

"Hid it," Sally said. "Just in case you

changed your mind about taking me along."

She led him around like a bull on a ring until he was inside the kitchen, standing in the beam of light from the bigger room. He grabbed her shoulder.

"Where is it?" Homer repeated.

Sally had done all she could. It was up to Slim Pryor now, and Slim did not seem to be moving. This Homer hombre had a bad reputation. He could have wrecked Billy's stage and robbed it of whatever lay in the little leather bag. He had been so careful to get rid of the loot and then to ride in as if he had come from the direction opposite from the robbery.

"I thought you was a phony out there in the shack," he said.

Slim spoke up softly.

Homer spun like a top, shoving Sally around for a shield. But Slim had been expecting something like that. Slim flung his water cup into Homer's face and charged. He got under the gun and twisted it from Homer's grip. With Sally between them, they battled furiously. Sally fought her way clear. Slim backed Homer out of the kitchen up against the bar. There he held him with a twisted wrist.

Sally shook like a quakie tree. She reached into her pocket, produced the bag, and poured the contents on the bar. The chunks of rock glistened like ice, or glass —or diamonds!

Slim handcuffed Homer to the billiard table. The two black-eyed cousins crept slowly toward the stack of jewels. They'd rob a corpse. But they got no chance at this loot. Slim scooped it back into the bag.

"Contraband," he said. "We got word it was coming up on the stage. Smuggled over the border. Homer must have gotten word, too." He grinned at Sally. "Reckon you get the award." Then he took off his hat. "Sorry that twin sister of yours up and drowned."

"I'm not," Sally said. " She was a dope. A big fool. Drowning is just what she needed." Sally stated her new intentions. "From now on I don't do any dishes in this place, or wait on bar. I'll wear my own clothes—and take first choice of the men."

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Her cousins were too astonished to protest. Linda recovered first.

"But my Sleem," she said. "You won't take heem away?"

"'Course not," Sally said. "Who wants a make-believe man who won't even kiss a girl when he has a chance?"

She set her shoulders. She glowered at everybody—and left.

* * *

Sally rode Black Beauty up to her spur. She threw a blanket on the grass and lay down to watch the stars. She had talked big and bold, but she knew she could not make it stick. If she went back to the ranch, they would have her enslaved again within a week. You couldn't fight people like that. They were made of rubber. They'd give and bounce right back. She would take her award and hightail it. Maybe she would turn outlaw. A girl alone is only half a person.

Black Beauty serenaded the stars.

Sally sat up and said: "No need to sneak around, mister. I heard you half a mile down the trail."

Slim came out of the brush. He loomed up dark and high against the starlight.

"Sally, gal," he said. "I gotta tell you something."

"Ain't interested!" she countered.

"I knew you weren't drowned," he insisted. "I saw your footprints where you crawled out of the drink. I spotted you lying in that crevasse. I thought it would be a good joke to leave you there and pretend you'd drowned."

My poor, aching feet, Sally thought. "It was a riot."

"Besides," he said, "I thought you were waiting for Homer."

"How do you know I wasn't?" Sally challenged.

"Because a gal like you can't wait for two men," he said. "She can wait for only one."

He drew her to him. She could not fight, and she would not have fought him off if she could. She just nestled up against him. When his lips touched hers, she knew he was right. Her waiting for her man was over. Here he was.

THE END

MISS LONESOME'S DECEPTION

(Continued from page 75)

How did you ever guess the truth, Tim Halloran?"

He smiled. "By the letters, themselves, honey. They were warm and loving and sweet. They had a gentle humor to them and they were thoughtful. They were just about the most perfect kind of letters a soldier could get from a gal back home. And I knew that Jean Marquand wasn't capable of writing letters like those."

He took a deep breath. Now his hands were gently caressing her arms above the elbows and sending little shivers of delight all through Linda. He went on: "Jean's beautiful, all right, but it was a cold, aloof sort of beauty. I realized that after I was away from her. There was nothing warm about Jean at all."

"But—but this other girl you said you'd fallen in love with, Tim?" she said, blushing. "Who—where is she?"

He pulled her close to him and held her so tightly she could hardly breathe. "Right here in my arms, where I've been waiting to get her for three years," he whispered softly.

She snuggled closer to him. "Oh, Tim! Tim, darling!"

"But I've got something to settle with her," he said with mock fierceness. "Awhile ago, she played a lowdown trick on me."

"What!"

"Back in town, when you met me as I got off the stage, you looked so—so blamed beautiful, Lin, that I just had to kiss you, even though I'd sworn I'd wait I got you off alone where I could do a good job of it. That was plumb ornery, honey, makin' a man kiss you right there in the center o' town, in front of all those folks, where he couldn't do his best."

Linda wriggled contentedly, smiled up at him, little lights in her eyes glowing like fire coals suddenly being fanned into flame. "There—there's nobody around, now, Tim," she murmured, watching his firm lips move down toward her own. She felt their quick, warm touch. Three years of loving and longing welled up into that kiss as Linda's arms went around him, and they stood there clinging to each other in the cool shade of the spring glade.

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(Continued from page 7)

All Aboard for Readin', Writin' 'n Romance

Dear Editor:

I am a young Newfoundland schoolmarm. This is my first attempt to hop the Pony Express. My hair is blonde, eyes green, height 5 ft. 3 in., weigh 120 lbs. I am 19 years old.

I love all outdoor sports, skating, cycling, and am very fond of dancing and music of all kinds. I like gaiety and fun and promise to write interesting letters. I would prefer letters from boys. Incidentally, I like them tall and dark.

ALICE BUTLER
Queen's Cove
Trinity Bay, Newfoundland

Paul's at Sea

Dear Editor:

I am in the navy and quite a long ways from home. I don't hear from many folks out here and it gets kinda lonesome on board. I was raised in Charleston, West Virginia. At present my step-parents are living in Yuma, Arizona. I am 22 years old, stand a little over 5 ft. 7 in. tall, and weigh 150 lbs. My hair is a wavy, dark brown and my eyes are also brown.

Being a hillbilly, I like nothing better than an old-fashioned square dance. I would like to hear from any girls 18 to 22 years of age. I love to talk about the open range, any sports; the West is in my blood. As soon as my hitch is up, I'll be back on the ranch.

I hope you will be kind enough to print this. Also, I hope all you folks will kinda drop me a line. I promise to answer all. This open sea without mail sure makes a man lonesome.

PAUL L. PATZOLD AN
Sqd. VA-25, CVG-2
USS Coral Sea (CVB-43)
c/o FPO, New York, N.Y.

A Notable Quintette

Dear Editor:

We would appreciate it very much if you would print our pleas for pen pals. We are five lonely 17-year-old seniors in the Pine Grove High School who would like to hear from some of you pen pals from the ages of 16 to 25.

Bettyann has dark blonde hair and green eyes, is 5 ft. 3 in. tall. She enjoys roller skating very much.

Eva has brown hair, blue eyes, and is 5 ft. 2½ in. tall. She enjoys Western music and movies.

Joyce has brown hair, blue eyes, is 5 ft. 8 in. tall. She has quite a record collection and enjoys movies.

Meva has dark wavy hair, hazel eyes, is 5 ft. 8 in. tall. She enjoys flirting with all guys.

Gladys has blonde hair, gray eyes, is 5 ft. 2 in. tall. She enjoys photography, writing letters.

Let's hear from all of you in the near future. We all enjoy sports.

BETTYANN LEHMAN, Rd. No. 1
EVA BREIDIGAN, Rd. No. 2
JOYCE SCHAEFFER, Rd. No. 2
MEVA AUNGST, Rd. No. 1
GLADYS BALTHAZER, Rd. No. 2
Pine Grove, Pa.

PONY EXPRESS

Picture-Hunter Bill

Dear Editor:

It would be a great pleasure to become a member of the Pony Express.

My experiences have been many and varied, having been a farmer boy, machinist, tool maker, pattern maker, commercial photographer, manager of a moving picture theatre, owner and operator of a recording studio.

I have indulged in many interesting hobbies such as: pistol shooting, big game hunting, fishing, vocal and instrumental music, cooking and canning and motor camping. Have traveled through 34 states and, at present, am senior member of a group making a photographic tour of the states—and more especially, the National Parks west of the Mississippi River.

I was also elected to do all cooking and seasonal canning (helpful suggestions welcomed). We travel with a house trailer and truck with sedan and service trailer for transporting accessories and supplies. We specialize in both black and white and color pictures of what we consider the most interesting material.

Spent last winter in the delightful Willamet Wonderland in Oregon, and have covered Yellowstone National Park, Sequoia National Park, Crater Lake National Park and much of the Pacific Coast, so far this season.

Nearly everyone has an objective—and mine is to sometime own a small ranch or farm of from 10 to 100 acres, way back in the mountains of some of our Western states, where one can have several different sorts of poultry, porkers, cows, garden, seasonal hunting and fishing, and really enjoy life and live well.

My nickname is Bill, and I will welcome letters from anyone 20 to 60, and will try to have prints for all who write really interesting letters.

G. A. MORRIS
General Delivery
Manteca, Calif.

Sisters—But Different

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping two lonely sisters can jump aboard the Pony Express.

Evelyn is 26 years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall and weighs 140 lbs. She has light brown hair and blue eyes. She likes movies and outdoor sports. Her hobbies are collecting recipes and stamps. She spends most of her time with her three active children.

Lorna is 16 years old and 5 ft. 4 in. tall. She has dark brown hair and blue eyes. Likes horses, movies and outdoors. Her hobbies are collecting snapshots and pictures of movie stars. She spends most of her time playing the violin.

We want pen pals mostly from the South and West. But all are welcome to write and we give our thanks to those who do.

You can write to us separate or double, for we'll get the letters either way. There is no age limit. We'll write to all who write to us.

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and
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I promise to answer each one—
From guys and gals of every age—
Whether old, middle-age or young.

I am 34 years of age,
My height is five foot three.
My hair and eyes are both brown,
And there are one-hundred-eight pounds of me.

My family consists of four girls and a boy,
To whom I am both mother and dad.
A trying job at times I'll confess,
But there's lots more good times than bad.

So come all, please, and send me some mail.
I'll appreciate it such a lot.
It will help to fill these long winter evenings,
And I'll answer right on the dot.

JUNE SACKETT
General Delivery
Colebrook, N. H.

Many Interests for Harold

Dear Editor:

Will you do just a little favor for me, which will bring a lot of enjoyment to a lonely man? I don't have a real home. I live alone in a rented room and get my meals out in restaurants. I would like an awful lot to receive letters.

I am a man of 45 years, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, with dark brown hair and gray eyes. A lover of outdoor sports, I fish, hunt, and take snapshots. I love to take short trips to places of interest such as large parks, zoos, flower gardens, fairs, or any place of nice scenery or amusements. I like all kinds of ball games and good shows. Would be glad to hear from everybody who would be interested in writing to me.

HAROLD J. FERRY
P. O. Box 1114
Decatur 80, Ill.

Betty Butter's a Button

Dear Editor:

Can you find room in your Pony Express for my letter? I love all kinds of animals, especially dogs. I like any kind of sport and movies. I have lived in St. Petersburg all my life.

I am 12½ years old, with brownette, wavy hair and blue eyes. I am 4 ft. 11 in. tall, weigh 75 lbs. and have a few freckles. My hobby is collecting any unusual objects. Please write.

BETTY BUTTER
1763 22nd St., South
St. Petersburg, Fla.

That's the herd of mail we've rounded up this month, for all you writing-rangers. Next month there'll be still more for you pards to answer.

Adios, amigos, until next month.

Build a Fine Business—FULL or SPARE TIME!

Sell MASON LEATHER JACKETS

EVERY OUTDOOR WORKER A PROSPECT!

Get Started Right—Don't Invest a Cent!

We furnish EVERYTHING you need to start selling quality leather jackets *at once*—and to build a fine profitable ever-growing business for yourself!

DON'T just "WISH" for independence. Get set now as factory man for this 45-year-old, million-dollar company—Leader in its field!

WE SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE MONEY FROM VERY *FIRST* HOUR

You get complete FREE SELLING OUTFIT—How-To-Do-It instructions that help you take orders and make money from the very first hour! You get Proved Selling Aids—a Book written from the practical experience of 5,000 Successful Salesmen—monthly newspaper gives hard-hitting ideas proved successful in the field—Customer Gifts that bring "Automatic Sales"—everything to help you cash in QUICK!

ALSO SELL EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez

AIR-CUSHIONED SHOES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Make EXTRA money with fast-selling full leather-lined Chukka Boot—scores of other fine footwear styles with wonderful Velvet-Eez comfort feature! 10,000 tiny air bubbles rest feet while you walk or stand. Over 150 styles for men, women! MORE extra profits from shirts, raincoats, sport jackets.

LEO DE MATO, WHO AVERAGES 6 SALES PER DAY, SAYS:

"I have over 645 customers. The Mason line, with commissions up to $3.00 a pair, is really SWELL! Not only am I anxious to sell these excellent shoes because it gives me the means to a more comfortable living for my family, but also, I am my own boss with no restrictions or time to account for."

GET FREE OUTFIT

NATIONAL ADVERTISING OPENS DOOR FOR YOU

Big powerful ads in Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, other national magazines make you known as the Mason Certified Shoe Fitter. You get the benefit—we pay the bills.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL CLINCHES SALES FOR YOU

REPLACEMENT OR A REFUND OF MONEY — Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping — IF NOT AS ADVERTISED THEREIN

Mason's Velvet-Eez shoes bear the Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal, reproduced above. This Seal ends hesitation, helps you sell more customers more items. You make more money when you handle this great line and enjoy the prestige of this famous symbol of quality merchandise.

RUSH THE COUPON TODAY!

Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
Dept. M-576, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your high quality Leather Jackets, exclusive Velvet-Eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush FREE SELLING OUTFIT to me right away. Send everything free and prepaid. (My own shoe size is.....)

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

M-576 Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Canada Unlimited

growth of an idea...

1943

1944

1945

1946

WILL GRANT AWARDS TO CANADIAN ARTISTS OF PROMISE

Since 1943 Canada Unlimited has been the theme of O'Keefe's advertising. Each year, one phase of the development of our nation has been traced in a series of paintings. Some of these paintings have won international awards as examples of fine art in advertising. They have brought credit and recognition to the many Canadian artists who were commissioned to paint them.

Last year a further step was taken to awaken in the minds of Canadians the greatness of this country of ours. The O'Keefe Foundation published a book which dramatically told the history of our country. Thousands of copies of "Canada Unlimited" have gone to Canadians and to other people in all parts of the world.

In 1950 O'Keefe's will provide an opportunity for the further development of the cultural life of our nation.

It has been widely recognized that there are many hundreds of Canadian artists whose ability deserves support and encouragement. To assist these young Canadians, O'Keefe's have established eighteen awards ranging in value from $200. to $1000. which will enable student artists of promise to further their training.

These awards will be granted to students between the ages of 18 and 30 who show they will benefit most from further study. Complete details together with application forms may be obtained by writing to The Director, O'Keefe's Art Awards, 47 Fraser Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, to whom completed application forms must be sent not later than April 15th, 1950.

F-218

1947

1948

O'Keefe's
BREWING COMPANY
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